

“ROSELIL AND HER MOTHER”: AN ARCHETYPAL INTERPRETATION OF A DANISH FOLK SONG

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The ground shook under my feet as the huge horses thundered by, each with a young lad on its back. In his right hand, each rider held a long spear that he raised just before attempting to catch a ring suspended over his head with its tip. I was only a child visiting my cousins in the countryside, but I remember the event vividly, and later on I would realize that I was witnessing an ancient tradition upheld through generations since the early Middle Ages. The one rider who could catch the ring would proudly give it to the girl in town he fancied. This was a symbolic gesture, as the ring symbolizes the unbreakable wholeness of a relationship between two people.

What I did not understand at the time was that there were archetypal patterns to human existence, templates of how we are to live our lives, offering insight into what happens at certain times and what needs to happen at other times. Thus, when I started studying to become an Archetypal Pattern Analyst, I began by reading four works by Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Cat*, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, *Archetypal Patterns in Fairy Tales*, and *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*.¹

Those books inspired me to look at old Danish folk songs in a new perspective. In this paper, I propose to explore the Danish folk song tradition through the lens of deep cultural and archetypal patterns; in other words, as though the songs were fairy tales. In this study, I will focus upon “Roselil and Her Mother,” a folk song which immediately came to mind, as this was a song of great popularity in Denmark.

¹ Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Cat: A Tale of Feminine Redemption* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1999); *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996); *Archetypal Patterns in Fairy Tales* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1997); *The Feminine in Fairy Tales* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

Folk songs, or ballads, as some scholars prefer to call them, were originally shared by the common people who would pass them on orally from generation to generation. They were often kept alive among the very wealthy who would entertain themselves and contract performances from traveling or local troubadours. These wandering musicians had much the same function as the storytellers in that they were the ones who kept the shared conscious myth alive and well. Folk songs only became commonplace and shared among the masses in the 16th and 17th centuries through the invention of the printing press. From then on they became available in songbook format and found their way to a broader audience. The first Danish folk song book was a handwritten collection from 1550 and was called *The Heart Book* because the book was shaped like a heart. Indeed, it could be said that they contained the heart of the collective wisdom, universal truths of the time, spoken in the poetic and symbolic language of music and lyrics. The Danish historian Anders Sørensen Weddel (1542-1616) printed the first folk song book in Europe in 1591 and entitled it *One hundred Danish (folk) songs*, published by Hans Bruun in the same year. While more widely available to the populace, as these folk songs were now accessible in print, it was not until the renewed search for historic identity in the late 18th and early 19th century in Denmark that the popularity of the traditional folk song really found resonance in the population. Since the early thirteenth centuries, traditional folk songs have been categorized according to their themes. For example, there are songs about knights, historical songs, magic and demonic songs, and songs about bravery. The Roselil ballad would fall under the first category, songs about knights. It is interesting that the songs were originally not only sung by the Bard or Troubadour, but also circle danced by the people who listened and participated in song, repeating the chorus which often followed each verse. This dancing and chanting in a circle is a powerful way to experience a folk song and it is still practiced in the very northern part of Scandinavia as well as on the Faroe Islands.

Singing and dancing entrain the participants into the field of the story itself. When all participants join hands and step in the same rhythm while singing the words of the tale, they enter another realm. Similar to the Shamanic journey, there are other realities and rules governing the transformative space of such experiences. When everyone is in alignment, it opens up the space for the numinous to be experienced as a psychic reality.

The song about Roselil was written by the Danish poet Christian Knud Frederik Molbech (1821-1888) in 1845, which was a time of great social change in Europe. In Denmark, it marked a period of a national search for identity after the devastating Napoleonic wars, which almost destroyed the capital, Copenhagen, and left the Danish economy in ruins. Knud's father was a professor of literature and a historian at the University of Copenhagen, and it is likely that his father's work inspired him to write the folk song in the traditional medieval style.

These are the lyrics which I have translated from the original Danish text² by C. K. F. Molbech:

Roselil and her mother sat at the table
 And they talked, made merry and laughed
 Ha ha ha, så så så
 Roselil said "Every tree in the garden must bloom
 With golden flowers before I shall marry!"
 Ha ha ha, så så så
 But Sir Peder stood under the roof and listened
 And said "he who laughs last laughs best!"
 Ha ha ha, så så så
 And when they entered the herb garden
 Golden rings hung on every tree branch
 Ha ha ha, så så så
 Roselil blushed and her cheeks turned red like blood
 She lowered her gaze to the ground
 Ha ha ha, så så så
 Then Sir Peder kissed her on the lips with passion
 And said "he who laughs last laughs best."
 Ha ha ha, så så så

This medieval-style folk song opens with the introduction of two females, Roselil, a young maiden, and her unnamed mother. With this opening, we are already oriented to the fact that this is the maternal world, where the feminine holds sway and the masculine aspect is either absent or needs renewal.

The two women have time on their hands to sit and play games while chatting away and entertaining themselves. We surmise that they are of the nobility because only the rich could possibly have had time for sitting around and playing games in medieval Denmark. Linguistically, the line "Roselil and her mother sat at the table" indicates that they were not just sitting but they were doing something, playing a game, or engaging in a pastime that did not require a lot of attention. It could be that they were doing some kind of handiwork. Clearly, they are living the life of leisure. This indicates that we are looking at a "kingdom"—that is, we are oriented to the ruling collective realm. While not clearly described as the seat of the town, it is clear that it is no mere peasant's home, but a home of some kind of nobility. The story is about the need for renewal of a central power in the town.

2 "Roselil og hendes moder," *Folkehøjskolens sangbog* (Odense, Denmark: Foreningens Forlag, 1989).

This is an archetypal motif. Since there is no mention of a father, we are oriented to the fact that the masculine is missing. It could be inferred that he was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or fighting the Moors in Spain, but whatever the reality, what is going to take place in the song is based on the fact that the ruling masculine power needs to be redeemed. The mother is in a sense replacing the masculine or the “King” motif and in doing so there is an imbalance. Marie-Louise von Franz writes, “In general, ruling persons in fairy tales represent dominants of collective consciousness.”³ I suggest that this applies to folk songs as well. Thus, we surmise that the masculine is that element which must be re-introduced into the realm, a new energy needs to enter, otherwise the feminine will stay one-sided and eventually the home will die off.

Then we hear that as Roselil and her mother are chatting away, the daughter exclaims: “Every tree in the garden must bloom/With golden flowers before I shall marry.” Roselil is clearly at the age when a suitor is expected. She is at the adolescent or young adult age where it would be appropriate for her to be getting married. In addition, without a new union between the young feminine with a young masculine, there will be no future for the continuation of the family tree.

In declaring to her mother that she will not marry until every branch in the garden is decked with golden flowers, Roselil is setting a challenge for any suitor who is thinking of winning her heart. She sets up the conditions by which the masculine can enter the realm and renew the family, but she does this through the lens of the magical thinking of a young child. It both sets the obstacle to the masculine which needs to be overcome as well as points to her own expectations of wanting someone who is special and with magical powers.

The song continues “But Sir Peder stood under the roof and listened/and said ‘he who laughs last laughs best!’ Ha ha ha, så så så.”

When Sir Peder hears this challenge, he is standing in Svalegangen. This is literally translated as a “covered roof,” which most often runs around a house to shelter it from the wind or rain. The word Svale is old Norse for “wooden beam.” It is of some importance that he is not inside the house. He cannot be inside that space because only the women are sitting in the room and women and men of nobility were separated in medieval times. He has not yet crossed the threshold into the family, and he does not yet have the authority to enter into that space. He is also not standing outside the building, but occupies an “in between” or liminal space, which in psychological language means to be in a place between the conscious and the unconscious. In that space, messages can emerge, solutions happen, and this is where Sir Peder gets the idea to win over the maiden, Roselil.

3 von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, 165.

“And when they entered the herb garden/Golden rings hung on every tree branch/Ha ha ha, så så så”

It is striking that the encounter between the lovers will take place not in a rose garden, which is the more common setting, but rather in an herb garden. This is where medicinal remedies are grown, where spices mature and poisonous plants grow. The herb garden is essential to medieval society. Although a few hospitals had been established by the monasteries from the beginning of the thirteenth century, in Scandinavia, people were accustomed to grow their own medicinal herb gardens. Before Christianity became the established religion, it was the village medicine woman who knew about the healing arts. Healing was kept in the maternal realm. However, in fourteenth-century Scandinavia, care for the sick shifted to being organized and administered by the Christian monks who brought a more systematic approach to herbal medicine. In Denmark alone, there were a total of one hundred and fifty monasteries, which offered healthcare for the population and which had well-organized herb gardens. In the song, then, the herb garden most probably alludes to this kind of medicinal garden which would be connected to a castle or large estate.

Thus, when the song says that the rings were hanging from the trees, it is because certain trees were cultured in the herb garden to enhance their medicinal effect. Since there were specific plants grown in the herb garden, which either promoted or discouraged the business of love, it makes a lot of sense that Sir Peder brought Roselil down to this garden. The story is coherent.

When Roselil walks into the garden, she sees the gold rings hanging from the branches of the trees. If it had been gold flowers it would have been a miracle, but because they are rings, and they are golden objects, they bind Roselil forever to Sir Peder. As an archetypal symbol, the ring is also the image of the sun. From a much older folk song in the Norse language, the sun was called “Ring” and the moon, “Manno.” The names appear in an old children’s song game (“Bro Bro Brille,” or in English, “London Bridge is falling down”), which is thought to be more than two thousand years old. In the children’s song, the symbols of the sun and the moon are opposite entities because the participants have to decide if they want to belong to the positive force of the sun (Ring) or to its opposite, the moon (Manno). In this much later folk song of Roselil, we see how the ring binds and brings to completeness the two characters. Von Franz says that the Ring expresses an eternal connection through the Self. It represents, not the ego connection, but the deeper eternal connection between two people. It is a sacred space, a temenos, which sets one apart.⁴ By wearing a ring on one’s finger, one is “set apart,” devoted to something bigger than the casual relatedness to others.

The song continues, “And when they entered the herb garden,” which includes both mother and daughter. This tells us that Roselil is still in the maternal realm. She has not yet separated out from the mother; she has not yet become her own

4 von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, 81-82.

woman. It is archetypally coherent that she still be accompanied by the mother who is to look after her and make sure that she is safe. She will also be witness to the union that is to come, lending legitimacy to the event.

“Roselil blushed and her cheeks turned red like blood/She lowered her gaze to the ground/Ha ha ha, så så så.” Roselil is both surprised and taken aback when what she thought was impossible was actually carried out. What had been a seemingly innocent desire is suddenly exposed as her true desire, to be united to the Other, to become a woman by being joined to a man. Her face turns red as blood. Blood is actually blue and only turns red when exposed to air, but everyone knows the feeling of being caught and how the blood rushes to the face and the skin changes into a deeper color. Her inner instinctual nature and the life force cannot be hidden, and it reveals her deepest desires, hidden even from herself.

The song also mentions that she lowered her gaze to the ground. We look down when we are faced with something bigger than ourselves, with the numinous. When caught in an act of wickedness or spite, we are caught, so to speak, “red handed” and we look down. We also use the form “to look down [upon]” to express disapproval of someone. There is the bowed head when someone submits to a domineering person or to the numinous. In the song, Sir Peder’s actions have revealed Roselil’s own desires to herself, and she submits, not to him alone, but to the power of that which constellated this union. This is the appropriate gesture of the human who is in relationship to the numinous. The head, which is the seat of human consciousness, bows to the Source of that consciousness. It is a beautiful act of acknowledgement that the ego is not the prime mover of one’s destiny. Roselil is in alignment with her destiny and “Then Sir Peder kissed her on the lips with passion/And said “he who laughs last laughs best.”/Ha ha ha, så så så”

Sir Peder has met the challenge presented by Roselil. He steps forward and kisses the maiden, signifying the union of the opposites, and by that intimate act, the two have become one. He has stepped into the role of the generative masculine in relationship to the feminine; the archetypal balance is restored between the maiden, Roselil, and the knight, Sir Peder. The “kingdom” has been renewed. Not only has the kingdom been renewed, but through the daughter’s separation from the mother into the arms of Sir Peder, she can begin her own individuation process. This allows her to remain positively related to the mother, and from then on, the young maiden will have to find new ways to identify with the masculine as opposed to her tight relationship with the maternal. One could say that the separation from the mother and the beginning of the daughter’s individuation process is just as important as the renewal of the kingdom. Without Roselil beginning her own journey separate from the constant domain of the mother, there will be no balanced kingdom, as the king would be stuck with a child and not

an individuated mature woman (Queen). In the children's folk song based on the original fairy tale, "Thorn Rose," the song tells us how Rose was a beautiful girl who lived in a castle. The evil stepmother puts a spell on the girl and she sleeps for a hundred years behind a wall of thorny rose bushes. When the prince arrives and kisses her, she wakes up and is a beautiful woman. The arrival of the masculine has released the spell and transformed the child from a little beautiful girl to a mature woman. In the folk song about Roselil one could draw the parallel that Roselil is in a state of sleep in her childhood until the moment when Sir Peder kisses her and she has to face reality as a woman and no longer as a child.

With the kingdom restored and the maiden Roselil transformed, the folk song ends on a positive note, as fairy tales are wont to do. And yet, we know that the story does not end here, that the time will come when even Sir Peder and Roselil's reign will require renewal. In fact, we could even say that this ending is the beginning of the next constellation, a new song to be sung.