“King Goldenlocks”: A Newly Translated Fairy Tale

BY MARIA TATAR

Editors’ Note: In March on the Book Bench, Maria Tatar wrote (http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/03/long-lost-fairy-tales.html) about a cache of five-hundred Bavarian fairy tales that were unearthed recently in Germany. The fairy tales were compiled by the nineteenth-century ethnographer Franz Xaver von Schönwerth, a contemporary of the Grimm brothers, who was fascinated by the folkways and stories of his native region and whose tales are more raw, more concerned with capturing the rhythms of local storytelling, than the ones familiar to us. Tatar has now translated one of the tales, “King Goldenlocks,” from Erika Eichenseer’s 2010 compilation of Schönwerth’s tales in German, “Prinz Rosszwifl.” We give the tale to you here for the first time in English. Asked why she chose this particular tale, Tatar said,

It gives us a persecuted hero rather than the conventional persecuted girl, a la Cinderella and Snow White, and it shows us that fathers can be just as cruel as the Grimms’ mothers and stepmothers. The tale also acts like a magnet, picking up bits and pieces of local color (laws about branding criminals, with punishments as a probation of sorts), Biblical and mythical themes (apples of paradise), and folk wisdom. What hooked me from the get-go was the parallel with the Grimms’ “Frog King,” which features a beautiful girl playing with her golden ball in the woods. Suddenly I understood the kaleidoscopic magic of fairy tales—a little twist here and another one there, and you have a completely different story, yet constructed from the very same bits and pieces.

And now presenting … “King Goldenlocks”!

A king had a son with hair of gold. One day the king went hunting in the woods and encountered a giant of a man leaning against a tree. He lifted his hunting horn, summoned his men, and they caught the wild man. Overjoyed, the king held a celebration and invited many other kings to join him.

Goldenlocks was playing with a ball and threw it right into the wild man’s cage, and he tossed it back. But the next time, he held onto it and said that he would return it only if Goldenlocks promised to set him free. While his father was sleeping, the boy tiptoed over and took his key, which was hanging on a chain around his neck. He set the wild man free and put the key back on the chain. The
festivities were just beginning, and the wild man was supposed to appear before the monarchs gathered in the hall. But he was nowhere to be found. The king flew into a rage and swore that he would punish the crime, even if it had been committed by his own flesh and blood.

One person knew exactly what had happened, and he betrayed Goldenlocks. The king tore at his garments, but ended up condemning his own son and ordering him to be executed in the wilderness. As proof, the servants would have to bring back tongue, eye, and finger of the boy. The men who took the prince into the woods were so moved by the boy’s youth that they decided to find a way out. They hailed a poor shepherd who was in the woods with his dog and said: “Do you like that fellow’s fine clothing? You can have them in exchange for your dog and your little finger.”

Right then and there, the shepherd boy bit off his finger and changed clothes with Goldenlocks. The servants cut out the dog’s tongue and eye, took the shepherd’s finger, and brought them all to the king. Goldenlocks had nothing left but a white cloth, which he used to conceal his hair. He travelled to a distant land, where he met a gardener, but the man had no interest in hiring a boy dressed in rags. Still, he finally agreed to let him stay on and even took a liking to him.

Every day the gardener would cut flowers and make bouquets for the three daughters of the king ruling over this distant realm. Goldenlocks would tie the flowers together and bring them to the daughters. The youngest of the three daughters was also the most beautiful, and so he always tied her bouquet with a strand of his golden hair. She liked that, and soon she liked the gardener’s helper as well.

One day it was announced that the eldest of the king’s daughters was to be married and that she would wed the man to whom she gave her bouquet of flowers. Suitors came from all over, and she chose one of the princes. She handed him her bouquet and travelled home with him. Later, the same events came to pass with another prince and the second daughter of the king.

When the youngest of the three princesses had come of age, the king arranged the festivities. She had a bouquet with golden hair wrapped around it, and she looked at the many princes gathered around and said: “There’s no one here for me!” The king summoned knights and nobles, but once again the princess said: “There’s no one here for me!” Then citizens and artisans were summoned. The princess moved through their ranks until she set eyes on the young gardener, and to him she gave her bouquet. The princess married the young gardener and moved into his hut.

Not much later the king became ill, and word went out that the only way to heal him was with apples from paradise. Everyone left to look for the apples, even the young gardener. He entered the woods and met the wild giant once again. “I already know what you are seeking,” he said. “Take this club and strike the rock
over there with it. Do everything that comes after quickly, otherwise you will perish.”

The gardener took the club, went over to the rock and struck it. He found himself in an enchanted garden awash in bright sunlight, full of flowers and branches with gold and silver leaves and fruits made of precious stones. The tree of paradise was growing right in the middle of the garden. He sprinted over to it and picked two apples from its branches. He was engulfed right then and there in an aroma so powerful that he nearly swooned. As the entrance to the rock began to close with a crash behind him, he raced out in the nick of time.

On the way home he stopped in a tavern and saw his two brothers-in-law, but they did not recognize him, because the white cloth was still covering his hair. They were keen to have the apples from paradise. “Why not,” said the gardener? “As long as you’re willing to be marked on your backs with the gallows.” They agreed, made the trade, and the gardener returned home.

Before long the king was ill once again, and this time it was said that snake’s milk might be able to cure him. The gardener went back to the wild man and managed to get two drops of snake’s milk in the same way he had acquired the apples. He received them from the radiantly beautiful snake queen in the palace of the enchanted garden. When he stopped at the tavern, the brothers-in-law wanted the drops as well, and he handed them over, but only on condition that they let themselves be marked on their backs with the wheel.

The king recovered, but a grim war broke out. The people rallied to the king’s side to drive out the enemy. His sons-in-law appeared with their armies, but for a long time the battle remained indecisive.

The gardener’s wife was against his joining up. She feared for his life but allowed him to observe the battle from a distance. He used that chance to run off and return to the wild man, who gave him armor, a horse, and a sword. He flew off to battle. But the battle remained indecisive, and a weeklong armistice was declared. After a week, war broke out again, and the wild man sought out the gardener, armed him, and told him that victory should still not be decisive.

War broke out a third time, and this time the wild man told the gardener that it was time for a decisive victory. He took his invincible sword and struck down his enemies. In the heat of battle between friends and foe, the king accidentally wounded the gardener’s foot.

When the battle was over and peace had settled over the land, the king tore a kerchief from his neck and bandaged the wound of the gardener, whom he didn’t recognize: the gardener was disguised, from head to toe, by his suit of armor.

Not much later, the king decided to host a banquet, and he decided to go over to the garden and invite his son-in-law, the commoner, who did not belong to the
nobility. Looking over the fence, he could see the gardener bandaging his injured foot with his own kerchief. He was astonished, but did not let on that he knew anything and persuaded the gardener to attend the banquet.

When the gardener arrived at the banquet hall, he was wearing ordinary clothes and still had on the head covering. He was given a seat between his two brothers-in-law.

“I will not sit between two fellows who have been marked by the wheel or the gallows,” the gardener declared, and he described what they had done with the apples from paradise and the snake’s milk. After the uproar, it was decided that the two should be broken on the wheel. But the gardener pleaded for mercy, and it was granted.

Messengers from a distant land suddenly appeared in the great hall and announced entered the great hall and announced: “Our king has died, and we are seeking a new king, his son, Prince Goldenlocks. By resisting the sorcery of the wonders in the garden, the charms of the snake queen, and the seductions of the invincible sword, Prince Goldenlocks liberated the wild man and lifted the curse on him. And all the while he has been toiling here in humble service.” The gardener blushed, took off his head covering, and his long golden locks fell down on his shoulders.

He was declared king in his homeland and the true heir of his wife, the daughter of his father-in-law.

_Illustration by Matthew Hollister._

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