

## Death in Folk Tales (A Brief Note)

*Micheline Galley*

To explore folktales on the subject of death seems at first sight an impossible enterprise. The themes folktales prefer to deal with are associated rather with learning what life is and how to behave in social relationships. When death figures in stories it generally appears as the final, natural stage in a human life, that of a father who dies just as the succeeding generation is getting ready to take over. It is at the end of a journey – that might be called one of ‘initiation’ – that the young hero, son of the dead man, has become able to play his adult role fully and found a family in his turn. The succession is assured, and so the order of things is perpetuated. This is the image of a tranquil death that occurs at the right time in the bosom of the family. But it is not the only one. . .

Indeed a quite different image emerges from a particular group of narratives where the circumstances of death make the individual a person who is apparently guilty of base behaviour: the corpse is put on general display, abandoned, left unburied. Refusal of burial is the initial narrative motif that leads to a series of episodes. We are dealing here with an extremely ancient story with many variations that became very widespread through the centuries, in both written<sup>1</sup> and oral<sup>2</sup> form. Here is an example of a version taken from the French tradition.

The little lad, who was so young, when he saw he had sold his goods very quickly, went off for a walk about town, just as I would have done. While he was walking, he saw a dead body on a dung-heap. He said: ‘How come they don’t bury dead bodies here?’ Someone told him: ‘It’s because he owes money!’ So he said: ‘Well, tell everyone he owes money to to come and see me!’ And that’s what happened! Jean de Calais paid all his debts and the body was buried.<sup>3</sup>

### **The man dying in debt**

Thus the reasons justifying the decision not to bury someone stem – we are told – from the non-payment of his debts.<sup>4</sup> But our young hero, moved by the sight before

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him, does all he can to 'deliver' the debtor in order to rehabilitate him in the minds of the living and bury his body with the dead.

Sometimes the punishment inflicted on the 'guilty' inspires so much compassion in their liberators that they do not hesitate to give all the money they have. A tale by the Brothers Grimm<sup>5</sup> illustrates this. It is the story of a tailor's apprentice who goes off on a journey; he has only three thalers in his pocket. Passing the gibbet, he sees a man hanging: 'I'm really sorry to see you hanging there exposed to general contempt!' he tells him. He beseeches the judge, who remains inflexible: 'I won't do anything . . . he's deserved it!' He offers all his money to recover the dead man and can finally take him down from the gibbet and bury him: 'Rest now in the name of God!' he says.

European and Mediterranean folklore is full of examples of this type. There is the Scandinavian version in which the corpse is laid on the frozen ground and is the object of various insults: 'And people . . . spat on that heap of ice; some even did worse.'<sup>6</sup> Another example is the Turkish version where one of the graveyard tombs is desecrated because the man buried there had not paid his debts.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the injury inflicted on the dead person from one story to another – body exhumed, the butt of insults, left to rot, devoured by animals, quartered – in every case the hero alone takes it upon himself to carry out the pious act due to the deceased:<sup>8</sup> having paid the 'ransom', he is not content with burying the body, he goes through the whole funeral rite. This is an exemplary act enabling the storyteller to underline the basic rule that can be summarized as follows: the rites due to the dead and strict observation of them are sacrosanct.

### Giving the deceased a burial: a sacred duty

In relation to the motif of refusing burial on account of debts,<sup>9</sup> we have noted its strangeness and yet its frequency. As is shown by mythology and folk literature, other 'crimes' apart from indebtedness may result in a refusal to bury. The decision is feared by the living as if they were less terrified of dying than of not being ritually buried, surrounded by their family. Hector is a prime example. When he is mortally wounded by Achilles' javelin, he implores his conqueror to have compassion – 'by your life and your knees and your relations',<sup>10</sup> he says – asking for his body to be brought back 'home'.<sup>11</sup>

Once again there appear the constant features of the need for burial and funeral honours rendered to the deceased. The character who best symbolizes faithfulness to this pious duty is probably Sophocles' Antigone. She does not hesitate an instant before defying King Creon's prohibition and sacrificing herself in order to recover the body of her brother Polynices and bury it as required. In doing so she is, as she herself says, obeying the law of the gods – an unwritten, immutable law.

Similar to Antigone is a mother, in an Egyptian tale reported by Herodotus, who is determined to recover her son's body, no matter what the cost. The circumstances of the boy's death, as related in a modern version of the Algerian oral tradition, are as follows:

Once night had fallen, they [the two brothers, who were thieves] went there and lifted the stone, and one of them got in. He entered and found he was caught in the net, trapped in the net. There was nothing he could do to get away . . . he could not extricate himself. He passed out to his brother as much treasure as necessary and said to him: 'Oh, brother, to prevent us being found out, ah . . . ! cut off my head and take it away, taking care not to let blood drip and leave marks . . .' And lo and behold, the next day, when the sultan opened the coffer, he found . . . that body, a torso with no head. He was astounded . . . The dead man's brother came, his mother said to him: 'You have brought me the head of my child. I beseech you to bring me his body so that I can bury him and see his grave.' And she started to weep. 'Hush, hush, mother' he said, 'you must not weep. I'll go and find a way of bringing my brother's body.'<sup>12</sup>

As we see, the mother's wishes are inflexible to the extent that, in some versions, the mother threatens to denounce her (surviving) son unless he brings her back his brother's body. She has to put the decapitated corpse back together before laying it in the earth. For making a mutilated body whole again, whenever that is possible, is traditionally an absolute requirement.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the central character of the tale finds only a head; he treats it with the respect due to it. Here is an illustration from two Kabyle stories:

A passer-by's attention is attracted by a plaintive call coming from a ravine. The man approaches and finds a human head that has been left there and is crying out its misfortunes. Moved by compassion, he buries the head, which [as is specified] can at last rest in peace. 'And no one ever knew anything about that poor boy slain by his brothers, apart from God, may He be glorified!'<sup>14</sup>

This is a pilgrim's head that was thrown down at the side of the road by his attackers and is recounting his sufferings. A man hears him, is moved and picking up the head gives it to his wife. But she commits what seems to be the supreme infamy and uses the dead man's head as a hearthstone. The husband punishes the guilty woman: 'May God curse your descendants!' he shouts. And he kills his wife, then leaves his country as if it was besmirched by this failure to observe tradition.<sup>15</sup>

### **The theme of the 'grateful dead'<sup>16</sup>**

Sometimes the action is given new impetus as a result of the dead person's gratitude. And it is the starting point for a whole series of events in various combinations. We have here a vast narrative cycle, rooted in popular traditions, on the theme that has generally come to be called the 'grateful dead'.<sup>17</sup>

The biblical story of Tobias, which is attested very early in the Near East, is a prototype. In it Tobias the Just (Old Tobias) spends his time, and risks his life, piously burying the dead victims of a tyrant. This is what he says:

I gave many alms to my brother; I offered my bread to the hungry, my clothes to the naked, and if I saw someone from my clan who was dead and thrown behind the ramparts of Nineveh, I buried him.<sup>18</sup>

The narrative pattern of the 'grateful dead' lies on two sequences that are linked in the following way. The aim of the first is to provide the dead person with a burial; I have mentioned various instances of this. The second is characterized by the help the dead person gives the hero in his quest (generally to find a wife). How does the dead person appear when he helps his young benefactor? In various ways, which are often mysterious. Sometimes he assumes human form; he awaits the traveller-hero at the crossroads, he appears out of the blue and becomes the hero's fellow-traveller, he is the guardian angel accompanying the young man.<sup>19</sup> At other times he is a being with an ambiguous identity, similar to an animal. Yet again the dead person's soul appears in an immaterial form: a voice.

In an Algerian tale it is in fact a voice that reassuringly talks to the mother after she has finished laying out the dead person, as she has been charged to do by the Genii: 'Here you are at home,' says the voice. 'No one will harm you or your children . . .'<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in a Moroccan story,<sup>21</sup> the young heroine is rewarded for her courage and the 'compassion' she showed to the dead person's suffering body.

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Though this survey has been a rapid one, it has led me to distinguish two opposite images of death: a serene, protected one of the father surrounded by his family; and another solitary, dramatic one, afflicted with indignity. It is the second that I have focused on here.

The texts I have referred to come from societies which, despite their cultural differences, share the belief that death is never final. That is why depriving someone of burial is the cruellest of punishments because it cuts off access to the world beyond.

The hero/heroine of our stories acts because of an ancestral law: the duty of respect for the dead body. S/he sometimes gains by it with the support of the 'grateful dead', who accompanies the protégé(e) and ensures his/her success, as if the tale wished to establish a continuity and suggest a relationship of interdependence linking the living and the dead.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

## Notes

1. Medieval European literature is proof of this.
2. For example, in Aarne-Thompson's international classification, types 505 to 508 and in the index of Turkish tales, Type 63 (W. and P. Boratav, *Typen des Türkischer Volksmärchen*). Greek versions are given in Anna Angelopoulos's article (1999), 'Un homme nu le couteau à la main', *Cahiers de Littérature Orale (CLO)*, no. 46, pp. 101–25; Arabic versions are listed in Hasan El-Shamy (1995), *Folk Traditions of the Arab World: motifs Q 271.1 and E 341.1*.
3. See A. De Felice (1954), *Contes populaires de Haute-Bretagne*, Paris, p. 122.
4. We should remember that a legal form of slavery for debt existed in pre-Solon Athens and in Rome

in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. Insolvent debtors became their creditors' slaves. Their bodies repaid their debt in accordance with what in Rome was called 'bodily constraint'. I am inclined to think that the clauses in the contract thought up by the usurer Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (a pound of flesh to be taken from the body) echo those practices hyperbolically. As for folktales, they seem to invoke the right of seizure which could be exercised, not on the living body but on the corpse. In this context it is interesting to point to the facts reported by Nicole Belmont (*CLO, op. cit.*, p. 133) on the basis of work by historians: sanctions incurred in the 15th century in Dauphiné, where insolvent debtors risked excommunication and a ban on being buried in the 'holy precinct of the graveyard'.

5. Translated into French by François Mortier. See *CLO, op. cit.*, p. 220.
6. See Virginie Amilien, 'Jean la Guenille' or 'Le Fils du roi', *CLO, op. cit.*, p. 79.
7. See Eberhard and Boratav (1953), Type 63.
8. The encounter with an unknown dead person (at the start of a journey resembling an initiation) is the occasion for our youth to prove himself: giving generously of his money and his aid, he insists on fulfilling his duty to the deceased.
9. A motif listed under Q 271.1 'Debtor deprived of burial' (El-Shamy, *op. cit.*).
10. *Iliad*, XXII, 336–41. It is the pressure applied by the gods from Olympus that will make Achilles decide to hand over to Priam his son's body.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Oral tale collected in Algiers by Micheline Galley. See 'Le sultan qui possédait une fortune' in *Le Figuier magique*, Éditions Geuthner, 2003, pp. 119–47, 251–5 and compact disk *in fine*.
13. A requirement that was always felt and still is. We find terrible evidence for this in the present day. Televised images show us the efforts of those who scrape together the smallest morsel of human flesh after a fatal attack. And for decades families try untiringly to discover the fate of loved ones who were seized by the authorities and remain unburied.
14. See A. Mouliéras (1965), *Légendes et contes merveilleux de la Grande-Kabylie*, translated into French by C. Lacoste-Dujardin, Paris, p. 88.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 529–30.
16. A special issue of *CLO* (no. 46) is devoted to this.
17. See in the index by El-Shamy, *op. cit.*, E 341.1.1H.: 'Dead grateful for having been spared indignity to corpse'.
18. I, 16–17.
19. A painting by Botticelli shows Young Tobias with the angel.
20. See 'La maison des richesses' in M. Galley, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–72 and 239–42.
21. See El-Fasi and E. Dermenghem (1926), *Contes fasis*, pp. 80–1.