

Arthur Rackham's 'Maid Maleen',
The Complete Illustrated Fairy Tales
of The Brothers Grimm (1917).



‘Maid Maleen’

A Fairy-Tale Study of Trauma

Katherine Langrish

‘Maid Maleen’ (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, tale 198) isn’t particularly popular as fairy tales go. It was first published as *Jungfer Maleen*¹ by Karl Müllenhoff in a collection called *Sagen, Märchen und Lieder der Herzogtümer Schleswig, Holstein und Lauenburg* (1845), from where the Grimms borrowed it for the 1850 edition of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. I don’t know whether Müllenhoff wrote it down verbatim from some oral source: he may have touched it up, but the Grimms made several slight but significant changes to his version, transforming it into a fairy story that delves unusually deeply into the trauma caused by abandonment and suffering.

Here is a brief account of their version: Maid Maleen, whose heart is already set on another prince, refuses to marry the suitor her father the king has chosen for her. To punish her, the king orders a dark tower to be built. Provisioning it for seven years, he seals his daughter and her maid up inside it, cutting them off from light. ‘There they sat in the darkness and knew not when day or night began.’

At first Maid Maleen’s lover rides uselessly around the tower calling her name, but no sound penetrates the walls and he finally gives up. The seven years pass, and Maid Maleen and her maid break out by chipping through the mortar and loosening the stones. ‘The sky was blue, and a fresh breeze played on their faces; but how melancholy everything looked all around!’ Her father’s castle lies in ruins and the land is waste and desolate. Hungry and desperate enough to eat raw nettles, Maid Maleen and her maid wander into another country and find kitchen work in the palace of the king whose son was Maid Maleen’s sweetheart. His father has chosen for him another bride ‘as ugly as her heart was wicked.’ Unwilling to show her face in public, the bullying bride forces Maid Maleen to dress in her wedding clothes and veil and impersonate her. The prince is astonished by Maid Maleen’s likeness to his lost love, but cannot believe it is she: ‘She has long been shut up in the tower, or dead.’

On the way to church Maid Maleen sees a nettle growing up between the stones, and speaks to it. ‘Oh nettle plant,’ she murmurs,

‘...little nettle plant,
What dost thou here alone?’

I have known the time
When I ate thee unboiled,
When I ate thee unroasted.'

'What are you saying?' asks the king's son. 'Nothing,' she replies. 'I was only thinking of Maid Maleen.' They cross the foot-bridge into the churchyard. 'Foot-bridge,' says Maid Maleen, 'do not break. I am not the true bride.' She steps through the church door: 'Church door, break not. I am not the true bride.' 'What are you saying?' asks the prince. 'Ah,' she answers, 'I was only thinking of Maid Maleen.' The prince hangs a precious chain around Maid Maleen's neck. They are married, but on the way home she does not speak to him, and arriving at the palace she 'put off the magnificent clothes and the jewels, dressed herself in her grey gown, and kept nothing but the jewel on her neck which she had received from the bridegroom.'

Now suspicious, on the wedding night the prince tests the 'wicked' bride by asking her to repeat what she said to the nettle on the way to church. The bride has to run and ask Maid Maleen for the answer, and the prince tests her further, asking what she said to the foot-bridge and what she said to the church door. Each time the bride has to ask Maid Maleen, till finally the prince asks to be shown the jewel he placed around her neck. Now the bride admits the imposture. She sends her servants to have Maid Maleen's head struck off, but Maid Maleen screams for help and the king's son rushes to her aid. Is it possible? Can this girl really be Maid Maleen, his lost true love...?

Why do I love this story so much? Isn't it just another tale of a passive princess sitting in a tower? In fact there aren't so very many stories of princesses shut up in towers, and those that do exist are less like the stereotype than people suppose. Like Maid Maleen, heroines quite often rescue themselves. Even in the case of 'Rapunzel' (*KHM* 12) the prince not only fails to rescue Rapunzel, but wanders blind in the desert until *he* is saved by *her*. In 'Old Rinkrank' (*KHM* 196), while the men in her life can only 'weep and mourn', a princess trapped in a glass mountain ultimately tricks her captor and engineers her own escape. More similar to 'Maid Maleen' is a Danish tale, 'The Girl Clad in Mouse-Skin',² in which the heroine digs her way out of an earthen mound. These tales are categorised in the Aarne-Thompson folk-tale index as tale type 870: 'The Entombed Princess or The Princess Confined in the Mound' – though this description, as Torborg Lundell has pointed out, is hardly adequate. Instancing 'The Finn King's Daughter', another tale in which an imprisoned heroine digs herself out from underground and rescues her lover from the false bride, Lundell writes:

In the Motif Index, practically all female pursuits are identified as "Search" and male pursuits as "Quest" ... The naming of the type of

tales to which the Norwegian “The Finn King’s Daughter” belongs provides another way of ignoring a heroine’s more adventurous qualities. ... Consistent with the Aarne and Thompson downplay of female activity, this folktale type, with its aggressive and capable female protagonist, has been labelled ‘The princess confined in the mound’ (type 870), which implies a passivity hardly representative of the thrust of the tale. ‘The princess escaping from the mound’ would fit better.³

Besides, stories know nothing of categories: they transgress boundaries, blend into one another and hang like cloudy tapestries in our minds, full of half-remembered patterns. In ‘Maid Maleen’ and ‘The Girl Clad in Mouse-Skin’ there are many similarities with another tale type, AT 425: ‘The Search for the Lost Husband’. In stories such as ‘The Black Bull of Norrøway’ or ‘East o’ the Sun, West o’ the Moon’, a heroine sets out in quest of a lost lover. After journeying for seven years, visiting the sun and the moon, climbing glass mountains in iron shoes and so forth, she usually arrives to find him on the point of marrying a troll or someone equally ugly and unworthy. Bribing the false bride with gifts gained on her journey – golden and silver gowns, golden spindles, a golden hen with golden chicks, etc – the heroine wins permission to spend three nights in the prince’s chamber. She sits at his bedside calling for him to wake, reminding him of who she is and what she’s done for him:

*Seven lang years I served for thee
The glassy hill I clamb for thee
The bluidy shirt I wrang for thee
And wilt thou no wauken and turn to me?⁴*

Drugged by the false bride, the prince sleeps too soundly to hear. By the third night though, having been informed by a servant about the beggar girl who sits by his bedside weeping and singing, the prince is wise or curious enough to throw away the sleeping draught. Hearing the song for himself, he recognises his true love and their long separation is ended: ‘He heard, and turned to her.’

The heroine of ‘The Girl Clad in Mouse-Skin’ spends seven years under a mound where her father has placed her, not in punishment, but in order to protect her from war. She is provided with light and food, and a little dog for company. When she runs out of food, her little dog kills mice for her: she eats the mice and sews their skins into a cloak, and when no one comes to release her she digs herself out. Covering her gold

and silver dresses with the mouse-skin cloak she presents herself at her lover's house as a poor girl in search of work. Now she discovers that her lover's new bride-to-be does not wish to marry him, as she herself has another sweetheart. The two young women co-operate and the heroine takes the bride's place at the wedding. Slipping away, she hides in her mouse-skin cloak again, only to throw it off and reveal herself dramatically at the wedding dance:

[She] stood clad in her beautiful gold embroidery, and was more lovely to look at than the other bride . . . Her sorrow was now turned to joy, and as she wished everyone to be as happy as herself, she bestowed land and money on the other bride, that she might marry the man of her choice, to whom she had given her heart. . . . And now the marriage-feast was gay, when the young lord danced with his true bride, to whom he had been wedded in the church, and given the ring.

The constant thing in most of these stories is that the *bridegroom* forgets what has passed between them but the *bride* doesn't. Once they are separated, the bridegroom is passive, the heroine active. Throughout her troubles she knows who she is: true lover and true bride, and this conviction and sense of destiny sustains and motivates her journey.

'Maid Maleen' is different.

A vein of deep seriousness runs through it from the very beginning. 'Maid Maleen' provides no extenuating motive for the king's incarceration of his daughter, such as to keep her safe from war. Indeed, there is a suggestive shadow of those tales in which the father feels an incestuous longing for his daughter. In Müllenhoff's version, the king has no alternative bridegroom planned, and so no reasonable excuse for objecting to her choice: in creating the extra suitor, the Grimms may have been trying to make the king's motives appear a little less sinister. At any rate by constructing a dark tower in which to shut her up, Maid Maleen's father certainly exercises abusive if not Freudian control. Both Müllenhoff and the Grimms emphasise the shocking, claustrophobic isolation of the princess and her maid, sitting in total darkness, 'cut off from the sky and the earth', unable to hear any sound from outside. Passive? Yes, but I think there is psychological realism in the patience with which Maid Maleen and her maid sit out the seven years. Imprisonment deprives them of agency. They cling to the belief that though the sentence is unjust, it is at least finite. They believe they will not be forgotten, that if they wait, in the end someone will come to let them out. But they *have* been forgotten: by the king, by the lover, by everyone.

The time passed by, and by the decline of food and drink they knew that the seven years were coming to an end. They thought the moment of their deliverance was come; but no stroke of the hammer was heard, no stone fell out of the wall.

All that prisoner-passivity and patience turns out to have been useless. The two women now seek actively to escape. They could have done so at any time before, but the weight of the king's sentence, and their belief in it, lay upon them. Here Müllenhoff, emphasizing the girls' self-reliance, writes, 'So they had to help themselves.' (*So mussten sie sich denn selber helfen.*) In the Grimms' version Maid Maleen takes charge of their destiny but her words hint at the desperation she feels: 'Maid Maleen said, "We must try our last chance, and see if we can break through the wall!"' Taking turns with a bread knife Maid Maleen and her maid scrape away the mortar between the stones and after three days of 'great labour' they push out a block and break through. Light rushes in. At last they can see the sky and breathe fresh air, but a new shock awaits:

Her father's castle lay in ruins, the town and villages were, so far as could be seen, destroyed by fire, the fields far and wide laid to waste, and no human being was visible.

At this point Müllenhof repeats the purposeful phrase, 'So they had to help themselves.' In the Grimms' tale the crushing effect of the discovery is conveyed by a rhetorical question, 'But where were they to go?' During their imprisonment the world has changed. Huge events have taken place, of which they in their isolation were completely unaware. How is a prisoner to adjust, adapt? New-born into this empty, post-apocalyptic land, their hard-won freedom brings no joy. They can only wander, starving, living on handfuls of nettles, till they cross the border into a country ruled by that very King whose son was Maid Maleen's lover. And he is about to marry another woman.

At this point in other 'lost bridegroom' tales there is a sense of great purpose: the girl's arrival at the place where her lover resides is the pinnacle of her journey, and she is full of determination to win him back. By contrast Maid Maleen's wanderings have been aimless. She's not aspiring to find and marry her sweetheart, she's simply trying to survive. Even when she finds work as a kitchenmaid in the palace and is employed in carrying meals to the chamber of the royal-bride-to-be, she seems stunned, passive, futureless. When forced under threat of death to impersonate the false bride, she suffers it as another indignity rather than seizing the opportunity to reveal herself to the prince. Nothing could be further from the confident resolve of the heroine of 'The Black Bull

of Norrway', or the mutually beneficial alliance of the two brides in 'The Girl Clad in Mouse-Skin'. Significantly at this point, as if to emphasise Maid Maleen's degradation, her own maid disappears from the story. Maid Maleen is the servant now. And so on her way to the church, dressed as the princess she used to be and holding her true love's hand, Maid Maleen sees a nettle growing by the wayside and it triggers a crisis. *I once ate nettles raw. Can I really be Maid Maleen? Who am I?*

'Do you know Maid Maleen?' the prince asks eagerly as she murmurs the name. And she denies it. 'No, how should I know her? I have only heard of her.'

Is she testing him? Is this a secret reproach? I don't think so. Maid Maleen has been a princess, a prisoner and a beggar. Her father forgot her. Her lover forgot her. The world forgot her. Now she is a kitchen-maid impersonating a princess, a pretender and cheat. 'I am not the true bride,' she repeats, afraid that the honest world will reject her, the foot-bridge break under her step, the church door split as she passes through. *'I am not the true bride.'*

In no other story I know of does this rejection of self occur.

Maid Maleen *is* the true bride, but dispossessed, traumatised, damaged. There is a poignancy in her behaviour which I find deeply moving. The world has broken under her and she cannot trust it, cannot trust herself. Her loss of identity is such that she will do nothing to reinstate herself, will not speak another word. It is up to the prince to put the false bride to the test as, unable to answer his questions, she tacitly admits her deceit:

**I must go out unto my maid
Who keeps my thoughts for me.**

Should we feel sorry for the ugly bride? That would be a very modern reaction. Fairy tales operate by particular rules. Youthful beauty always signifies goodness, ugliness its opposite: what you see is what you get. Nevertheless, unlike, say, the troll bride of *The Black Bull of Norrway*, this particular false bride *knows* she is ugly, and when she repeats Maid Maleen's words to the prince, she is being forced to utter the truth about herself: 'I am not the true bride'. Is it an elaborate trap? Can Maid Maleen be deliberately tricking her?

In another tale she might. It's a ruse I can imagine Tatterhood or the Mastermaid, or any number of other ingenious heroines might employ. It could even be true of Müllenhoff's tale, but the Grimms' story just doesn't feel like that. In 'The Girl Clad in Mouse-Skin', the mirror-opposite situation of the two brides works to their advantage. In 'Maid Maleen', the heroine and the false bride mirror one so another so strikingly in their low self-esteem, that on a psychological level the ugly false bride may even *be* Maid Maleen.

The truth comes out, however, and the prince wishes to see the mysterious maidservant. In a final effort the false bride sends servants to kill Maid Maleen. The shock of sudden physical danger at last provokes a reaction: Maid Maleen screams so loudly

that the prince rushes to her aid. Here the Grimms' telling of the tale diverges significantly from that of Müllenhoff, in whose version the prince's eyes are opened 'and he saw that she was no other than his former beautiful true bride that he had quite forgotten, that Maid Maleen was the same woman she herself had spoken about on the way to church.' ('...und er sah, dass sie auch keine andre sei als seine ehemalige Braut, die er ganz vergessen hatte, das die Jungfer Maleen selber sei, von er sie immer auf dem Kirchwege gesprochen!') With that, the story ends. Without more ado the prince orders Maid Maleen to be taken to a fine room, and the false bride's head to be struck off. The patriarchy disposes. Maid Maleen herself says nothing.

The Grimms do a lot more with this. First, before he actually recognises her, the prince acknowledges Maid Maleen as 'the true bride who went with me to the church,' confirming her as at least his wife, *whoever* she is. Only after that does he tentatively explore further: 'On the way to the church you did name Maid Maleen, who was my betrothed bride; if I could believe it possible, I should think she was standing before me – you are like her in every respect.'

'You are like her in every respect.' Following this proclamation of her worth, Maid Maleen finds her voice. Now she herself speaks out: at last comes the '*seven long years I served for thee*' moment when, by restating her experiences, she reclaims her identity, a moment more poignant for the real suffering which has preceded it. There has been no assistance for this girl from the sun, moon and stars, no golden and silver dresses or magical gifts to barter with. No magic at all.

'I am Maid Maleen, who for your sake was imprisoned seven years in the darkness, who suffered hunger and thirst, and has lived so long in want and poverty. Today, however, the sun is shining on me once more. I was married to you in the church, and I am your lawful wife.'

This fairy tale is a remarkable account of psychological trauma inflicted by suffering, all the more effective because of the other narratives with which it can be compared. There are many fairy tales in which a girl sets out to find a lost lover, but though her quest may be arduous she is always confident of her identity and what she is trying to achieve. When Maid Maleen escapes from her tower, however, the empty landscape through which she wanders is her internal landscape, a wasteland devoid of sustenance. There is nothing familiar in it, no one left who knows her, and she no longer knows herself. Physical survival is not enough. Unlike the heroines of other 'lost bridegroom' tales she is too unsure of herself to claim her lover and her place at his side. '*I am not the true bride.*' Not until at some deep level the prince recognises her does she recover her voice and, in telling her

story, claiming her experiences and linking them together, reaffirms her identity and emerges from darkness. 'Today the sun is shining on me once more.'

There can be little more to say. In true fairy-tale fashion the lovers live happily for the rest of their lives and the false bride has her head struck off. The story ends with a nursery rhyme which Müllenhoff places at the end of '*Jungfer Maleen*' – not as part of the tale, but as an interesting note or cross-reference. The Grimms, however, build the rhyme into the narrative so that it becomes a wonderfully evocative coda, distancing and mythologising Maid Maleen as she disappears from memory into children's rhymes and games.

The tower in which Maid Maleen had been imprisoned
remained standing for a long time, and when the children
passed it by they sang,

“Kling, klang, gloria
Who sits within this tower?
A King's daughter, she sits within,
A sight of her I cannot win.
The wall it will not break,
The stone it cannot be pierced.
Little Hans with your coat so gay,
Follow me, follow me, fast as you may.”

It's a curiously light-hearted ending to a dark and profound tale. Preceded by a peal of bells, suffering and imprisonment vanish into a children's circle dance. I am reminded of the end of Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* when after death Troilus's 'light ghost' ascends into the heavens, and looks back at the 'little spot of earth' where he loved, fought and suffered and where everything seemed to matter so much – and laughs. Perhaps the wise fairy tale is telling us that in the end, all things mortal fade so?

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Notes

1. Throughout this essay I am indebted to Heather Robbins for kindly making available to me her unpublished translation of Karl Müllenhoff's '*Jungfer Maleen*'.
2. Benjamin Thorpe, 'The Girl Clad in a Mouse-Skin', *Yule Tide Stories*, 1888.
3. Torborg Lundell, 'Gender-Related Biases in the Aarne-Thompson Indexes', *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, 1986, ed. Ruth Bottigheimer.
4. Robert Chambers, 'The Black Bull of Norroway', *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*, 1870.