



Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

WWU Honors College Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

Spring 2023

Common Threads: Centuries of Folklore Told Through Tapestry

Audrey Wheelock

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wheelock, Audrey, "Common Threads: Centuries of Folklore Told Through Tapestry" (2023). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 659.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/659

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors College Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

2 June 2023

Common Threads

By Audrey Wheelock

Humans have been telling stories for as long as that's been a meaningful concept. Whether to entertain, educate, or pass on history, storytelling has been a cornerstone of human civilization and culture. Many of the oldest stories were passed down orally. As a result, an elaborate game of telephone played out across generations and continents. Inevitably, the same story was told dozens of different ways as a result. Stories that modern audiences are familiar with, like Snow White or Cinderella, are only the most recent iteration of tales that have existed for hundreds of years.

A History of the Erlking

The Erlking is a lesser-known but fascinating example of this phenomenon. The story can trace its earliest roots to legends of faerie circles and Germanic folklore. Stories of children and innocents lured into the forest and trapped or killed by fae or woodland creatures are common across many cultures. A Germanic legend tells of an elf who lures children to their doom in the Black Forest. One of the earliest written versions of the Erlking was a poem by J. W. von Goethe in 1782. Goethe was directly influenced by the Germanic legend but added additional details to the tale. Goethe's poem tells the story of a father and son riding home through a forest. The boy is alarmed to notice the Erlking following them. The Erlking, or Erlkonig in Goethe's native German, attempts to lure the boy by telling him of the flowers, dancing, and fine things that await him in the forest. The boy warns his father, but he brushes off his son's concerns, telling him it's only the mist and wind. Eventually, the father believes his son and speeds up on their journey home. But it is too late, and the son is dead by the time they're home.

Since the eighteenth century, there have been several other written versions of the story. In 1815, Franz Schubert created a ballad version of the story, written for piano and voice. The ballad shares many superficial similarities with Goethe's poem, but Schubert's version adds to mood and tone through the addition of music and served to popularize the tale. It also serves as one of the first forays into representing the tale in a different medium. Ballads, lyric poetry, and oral performances have been used to pass down stories for millennia. However, this is one of the first instances of the story being recorded in this form.

One of the most recent written versions of the story comes from Angela Carter's 1979 anthology, "The Bloody Chamber." The anthology is a series of feminist retellings of folkloric stories. Carter's version of the Erlking centers on a woman rather than a father-son pairing. The woman is in the forest when she notices the Erlking living in a cottage. She and the Erlking live together and become lovers. As seasons pass, she begins to notice that things feel amiss. The Erlking keeps birds in cages and she remarks on the cruelty of this. Eventually, she realizes that the birds are the Erlking's past lovers. She struggles with what to do, for she has formed a genuine relationship with the Erlking and cares for him. He cares for the birds and is not cruel to them, but she refuses to be trapped. When she realizes he is creating a cage for her, she strangles the Erlking with his own hair.

Angela Carter's story has several intentional deviations from earlier versions. In both the folklore and written versions of the Erlking, the main character is deprived of agency. The children lured to the forest are powerless to fight creatures there. The boy in Goethe's poem pointedly is alarmed by the Erlking and refuses his temptation, but his efforts were pointless, as he was killed regardless. His resisting temptation did nothing to save him. The doom of these

characters feels inevitable and they are powerless to stop it. Angela Carter restores her character's agency in a subversion of the damsel in distress archetype that many folkloric stories rest upon. The woman is initially lured in, but is given the agency to notice when something is amiss and the power to save herself. Despite these deviations, several initial themes remain consistent. The allure of nature and the Erlking himself is emphasized, as it was in earlier renditions.

There have also been several paintings and engravings of the story throughout the past three hundred years. Many of these visual depictions share similarities with one another, but add a layer of visual symbolism and tone to Goethe's poem and the original folklore. Many of the pieces portray the Erlking as a ghostly figure, with a white, often transparent, cloak. This lends a ghostly, wraithlike air to his character. He feels less solid and real than the other characters. In many cultures, white can be a symbol of death and is worn at funerals. Most visual depictions of the story are in black and white, which serves to make the Erlking stand out even more, as a ghostly figure amongst a dark forest. Goethe's poem and the Germanic folklore also do not explicitly name a season or time period. Much of the original folklore does not even refer to a specific instance or story, but rather a series of children that have gone missing to lend an air of mystery and danger to forests and dark places. Many of the visual depictions specifically portray the trees and dead, suggesting it is autumn or winter.



Moritz von Schwind 1830



Herman Pluddermann 1852

Across mediums and iterations, several themes and symbols have been consistent. The general story structure almost always begins with nature or the Erlking himself presenting temptation. False promises, natural beauty, and promises of companionship or love are used to lure in the Erlking's prey. That temptation eventually turns into danger. In Goethe's poem, when the boy refuses him, the Erlking turns to force. In Angela Carter's version and many of the old faerie circle legends, the intention is to trap the person, rather than kill them. Regardless of the goal, an initially beautiful and alluring appearance turns out to be deceptive. In most versions of the tale, the victim is inevitably trapped or killed. Carter's version is a notable subversion of this theme in that the main character is allowed to survive her story. Visual depictions are mostly consistent with these themes, but add the symbolism of the white cloak and autumn, both of which could foreshadow the death and danger that Erlking brings.

A Tapestry of the Tale

In creating my own depiction of the Erlking, I wanted to stay true to the themes and messages of past renditions while still adding my own flair to the story. I took elements from each version of the story and brought them together to create a cohesive narrative. The story told in my tapestry goes like this: two women enter a lush forest. One keeps her eyes on the horizon

while the other is distracted by the natural beauty around them. She notices a pool on the forest floor and is unknowingly lured in by the Erlking. Soon she is trapped in a cage of the Erlking's making. She reaches out for her friend, who frees her and takes her from the forest. I wanted to preserve elements of Angela Carter's feminist retelling while maintaining the theme of platonic love. Carter's version has only one human character, so I added in an additional human character. I focused on the platonic love and care between the two human characters as what saved them and allowed them to leave their encounter with the Erlking safely. Although I appreciate the agency that Carter affords her characters, her rendition portrays love as part of what traps women. Her story is a product of the 1970s feminist movement during which it was written. I chose not to focus on romantic love at all, but rather to center the ideal of platonic love through the relationship between two women. In this sense, I took what I perceived to be the best parts of both the Carter version and the Goethe version. Visually, I depicted this story in the form of a painted and cross-stitched tapestry. Human characters are cross-stitched, while the background is painted. To add texture to the background, additional details are embroidered over the top of the paint. I appreciated the detail that stitching allowed me for the human characters, but stitching was impractical for the background, given the sheer amount of time it would have taken to stitch the whole thing. Painting was more practical in terms of time, but the cloth was not conducive to detailed painting. Thus, I stitched on top of the paint to add in additional texture and detail that the painting did not allow. Earlier visual depictions of the Erlking only portray a single frame from a larger story. I chose to create a tapestry with four panels so I could demonstrate changes over time and how the story and characters progress. Each panel represents a moment from a larger story. The background color of each panel is a different shade of green to represent the mood at that point in the story. The first panel is a lighter green to represent the beauty and safety

the characters feel. The second and third panels are darker to represent the impending danger. The final panel is lighter to represent the hope and escape the second woman brings. A painting of the Erlking grasping for the cage is superimposed in between the panels. I maintained the white cloak imagery from several paintings and engravings of the Erlking. I intentionally did fewer layers of paint than in the background to give him a wraithlike appearance.



Narratively, I kept the idea of nature acting as a lure for the Erlking from the original faerie circle myths. To pair with this idea, I went against many of the visual depictions and set my version in summer. The autumnal season of many of the visual depictions of the story adds a

layer of danger and mystery to the setting, but contradicts the apparent temptation of nature. In many versions, the Erlking specifically describes flowers, lush streams, and natural beauty to lure in his prey. The forest in October presents a dangerous, creepy visual, rather than an alluring one that audiences could see characters being tempted by. For this reason, I chose to portray a forest in Summer.

I also decided to portray the Erlking as a character desiring to trap his victims, rather than kill them. This is in line with Angela Carter's short story and many of the older legends of faerie circles. I used Angela Carter's idea of a cage because it provides a striking visual symbol of entrapment. I painted the cage in gold to demonstrate how the woman is trapped in a gilded cage. I used the color gold as a symbol of danger and the Erlking himself. I continued this color in the Erlking's crown, as well as golden flowers in all four panels. In the first panel, the gold flowers are only in the lower right corner. The characters do not yet perceive the danger around them, but it is lurking in the background. In the second panel, gold flowers and danger are all around, though the woman is too occupied with the pool to notice it. In the third panel, the woman is trapped and surrounded by gold flowers. In the final panel, gold flowers are creeping in the left side, but the woman is pulled away from them by her friend.

Something that I wanted to prioritize was demonstrating agency and the lack of it. The main character loses agency when she is trapped, but still has the ability to reach out to her friend. Even though she doesn't have the ability to save herself, she is willing and able to reach out for help when she needs it. This is something that is denied to other versions of her character. Her parallel, the boy from Goethe's poem and Schubert's ballad, is unable to save himself, and even when he reaches out to his father for help, his efforts are futile. In my version, agency is restored to both human characters, and their bond is what allows them to survive and escape.

Like many past versions, my rendition of the Erlking story is a product of its time and reflects the priorities and ideals of its creator. Early versions of the story were intended to serve as a warning. Particularly the Germanic and Danish folklore was intended to warn children from wandering into the Black Forest by themselves. Later versions were a commentary on the relationship between man and nature or the realities of deceptive romantic relationships. In constructing my version of the story, I prioritized returning agency to my characters and focusing on platonic love. Many fairy tales and stories in general paint romantic relationships as the end goal and I wanted to portray a different kind of relationship as the end goal.