

FEMININE POWER IN A FAIRY TALE

DAVID L. HART

Without defining what the feminine is, many fairy tales reveal it to be a decisive and fateful power, whose overall effect for good or ill depends substantially on the state of that human consciousness that confronts it. It can thus be seen in many different ways, negative or positive, depending on who meets it and in what way. The outcome of a story will rest on the spiritual qualities of that hero who is called upon to deal with this power, for those very qualities are essential to its transformation back into its true nature.

To illustrate this vital state of affairs, let us look at a fairy tale from Iceland.

Hildur the Elf Queen¹

There was once a farmer who lived on a certain farm in the mountains, though neither his name nor that of the farm is recorded. He was a bachelor and had a housekeeper named Hildur. She was in charge of all indoor work on the farm, and was well liked by the housefolk, including the farmer himself; but she kept her distance from him, being a reserved woman and somewhat silent, though pleasant enough and easy to get on with.

The farmer's affairs were in a flourishing state in all but one respect; he was an excellent sheepfarmer and attached great importance to the proper care of his flock, but he had unusual difficulty in hiring shepherds.

It was not that he treated his shepherds harshly, or that there were any shortcomings on the part of Hildur; it just happened that none of the shepherds hired by him ever reached old age, for every man of them was found on Christmas morning dead in his bed.

In those days it was the custom throughout the country for church service to be held on Christmas Eve, which was then considered no less solemn an occasion than Christmas Day itself. But on those mountain farms which were far from church, it was no

DAVID HART, Jungian analyst, member of Round Table Associates and the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology, is a University of Zurich Ph.D. and 1955 diplomate of the Jung Institute. He is widely known for his lectures and articles on the psychological meaning of fairy tales.

easy matter for folk to get to the service in good time, especially those who were not able to leave before the Seven Stars were well above the horizon when the shepherds came home. However, in this farm they had no trouble finding someone to watch the house while the others were in church—Hildur always offered to do this while she got on with the work of making ready for the festival. She would stay up late into the night, preparing food and dealing with other necessary matters, so that the churchgoers were sometimes back from the service, in their beds asleep, before Hildur went to bed herself.

For some time now there had been this trouble of the shepherds dying on Christmas Day. Word began to get about all over the district, and the farmer had the greatest difficulty in hiring men for the work, though there was never any suspicion, either against the farmer or his people, for the shepherds were all found without any mark or wound on them.

Finally the farmer declared that he could no longer have it on his conscience to hire men to their certain death; so in future, how his flock and his farming might fare, fate alone must decide.

When the farmer had made up his mind about this and was firmly resolved not to hire another shepherd, a man came to him one day and offered his services. He was a strong, sturdy looking fellow.

"I have no need of your services," said the farmer.

"Have you hired a shepherd for the season?" asked the stranger.

The farmer replied that he had not; nor had he any intention of doing so. "I dare say you have heard about the disasters that have befallen all my shepherds up to now," he said.

"I have heard," answered the stranger; "but their fate would not frighten me from watching your flock, if you will have me."

Since he urged this so earnestly, in the end the farmer gave way and hired him as shepherd. After that, some time passed, and each got on well with the other, farmer and shepherd; everyone else liked the shepherd, too, for he was well-mannered, brave, and energetic in doing whatever lay to hand.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened, until Christmas time arrived. Then, as usual, the farmer and his people set off for church; all, that is, except the housekeeper, who stayed at home, and the shepherd who was out watching over the sheep.

Evening drew on, and the shepherd came home as usual. He ate his supper and went to bed.

Although he was without fear, it now entered his mind that it might be wiser to wake than sleep, whatever might befall; and so he lay awake.

When it was very late he heard the churchgoers returning home. They got themselves a bite to eat, and then went to bed.

The shepherd was still aware of nothing unusual; but about the time when it seemed to him that everyone was asleep, he began to feel a strange weakness, as if the strength had been drained out of him, though this was scarcely surprising to one weary after the day's work. Nevertheless he felt sure that it would go ill with him if he let sleep overcome him, and so he used all his will power to keep himself awake.

A short time passed by, and then he heard someone coming to his bedside, and he seemed to sense that it was Hildur the housekeeper. He pretended to be fast asleep, and felt her push something into his mouth. He realized that it was a witch bridle, but let her put it on him.

When Hildur had harnessed him, she led him gently out, mounted on his back, and rode him as hard as she could, until they came to a place where there was a kind of pit or chasm in the ground. There Hildur dismounted beside a rock and made fast the reins. After that she vanished from sight down into the chasm.

The shepherd found it little to his liking or to the satisfaction of his curiosity to lose sight of Hildur in this way. At the same time he could not follow because of the magic that was in the bridle. However, he managed to rub his head against the rock until he got the bridle off. Then he dived down into the chasm after Hildur.

He had not gone far—or so it seemed to him—when he saw her in front of him. She had come to a fair, smooth meadow and was walking quickly across it. By now the shepherd had realized that Hildur was not what she seemed to be. He thought, too, that she was sure to see him if he followed her over the meadow, so he took out a stone of invisibility that he carried in his pocket and held it in the palm of his left hand. Then he hurried after Hildur as fast as he could. As he crossed over the meadow, a large and magnificent palace came into view. Hildur went straight towards it, and the shepherd saw a great mob of people coming out of the palace to meet her. They were led by a man dressed more splendidly than the others, and the shepherd heard this man greet Hildur as his

wife and bid her welcome, while the rest of the people hailed her as queen. With the noble looking man were two grown up children, who went to Hildur and embraced her joyfully as their mother.

When this crowd had greeted the queen, she was escorted into the palace with her husband and received there with the greatest ceremony. The shepherd followed, staying always where he would draw least attention to himself, yet seeing all that went on. He saw such riches and splendor that never in his life had he set eyes on the like before.

Tables were laid and food brought forth, and he wondered much to see the ceremony with which all was done. After a while he saw Hildur come into the hall dressed in royal robes and with a ring of gold on her finger. People were told to take their places, and Queen Hildur sat down on a throne by the king with the courtiers on either side, and everyone ate.

When supper was done, the tables were taken away and the courtiers and ladies-in-waiting joined in a dance at will, while some amused themselves in other ways that pleased them better.

The king and queen conversed together, and to the shepherd it seemed that their conversation was both loving and full of sadness. While they talked, three children came to them, younger than those mentioned before; and they, too, embraced their mother. Queen Hildur returned their embraces very warmly. She took the youngest child and set it on her knees, and was most affectionate towards it; but the child was fretful and behaved badly, so the queen put it down and, taking the ring from her finger, gave it to the child to play with. The child was quieted and played with the ring for a while; then dropped it, and the ring rolled away on the floor. The shepherd was close by, and he was quick to snatch up the ring as it rolled across the floor, and put it in his pocket so that no one noticed; though all thought it strange when they looked for the ring and could find it nowhere.

When the night was well advanced, Queen Hildur began to make a move to leave; but all in the palace begged her to stay there longer, and were very sorrowful at the signs of her going.

Sitting in one part of the hall the shepherd had noticed a woman, old and somewhat disagreeable looking. She was the only one who neither had welcomed the queen when she came, nor tried to delay her departure. When the king saw that Hildur had made up her mind to go, and that she would not stay either for his prayers or for those of any other, he went to this woman and said.

"Mother, now take back your curse and pay heed to my prayers, that my queen be exiled no longer, nor I enjoy so little and such short-lived solace of her company, as now."

The elderly woman answered him angrily, "The whole of my curse shall stand, and there is no hope of my taking it back."

The king was then silent and walked sadly back to the queen, put his arms about her neck and kissed her, begging her again with loving words not to leave him. The queen replied that she had no choice, because of his mother's curse, and it was likely that they would see one another no more; for the crimes she had unwillingly committed, because of the horrible fate that followed her, were now so many that they could no more be hidden, and she would have to suffer the penalty for them.

While she made this lamentation, the shepherd, seeing how matters were, slipped out of the palace and hurried back across the meadow and up through the chasm again. Then he put away the stone of invisibility, put on the bridle, and waited for Hildur to return. After a little while she came, alone and in mournful mood. She mounted on his back once more and rode homewards. When they reached the farm she laid him carefully in his bed, took off the bridle, and then went to her own bed and lay down to sleep.

Although the shepherd was wide awake all the time, he still pretended to be asleep, so that Hildur should suspect nothing. When she had gone to bed, though, he relaxed his watchfulness and slept. He slept late into the day, as might be expected.

The next morning the farmer was the first afoot, for he was anxious to visit his shepherd; fearing to find him dead, as had happened before on Christmas Day, bringing grief instead of Christmas gladness. He went, therefore, to his bed and felt him, and, finding him alive, was filled with joy and thanked God for his mercy.

The shepherd awoke, hale and hearty, and got up. When he was dressed the farmer asked him whether anything unusual had happened during the night.

"Nothing," replied the shepherd. "Though I had a remarkable dream."

"What kind of dream?" the farmer asked.

The shepherd began now to tell the story that has been heard already: how Hildur the housekeeper had come to his bedside and

bridled him, and after that every word and deed he could remember. When he was done, all were silent, except Hildur.

She said, "You have shown yourself a liar in every word you have spoken. What proof have you that your story is true?"

The shepherd was not the least abashed at this. He took out the ring that he had picked up from the palace floor in Elfland, and replied, "Though I do not think it my duty to prove my story true, yet it happens that I plainly have here a token of my visit to the elves last night. Queen Hildur, is this not your ring?"

"Yes," replied Hildur, "and you are the luckiest and most happy of men, for you have released me from the curse laid upon me by my mother-in-law, by which I was compelled to commit so many crimes at her will."

And now Queen Hildur told her story in the following words. "I was an elf maiden of common kin, but he who is now king of Elfland fell in love with me and married me, against his mother's will. She was so enraged that she swore he would have little solace of my company though we might see another from time to time. For she laid upon me this fate: to be a servant in the world of men, and with it, the horrible doom to be the cause of a man's death on every Christmas Eve by putting a witch bridle on him and riding him, as I did this shepherd last night, to see the king; and this was to go on until my guilt was discovered and I was put to death; unless before that I met some valiant man who dared follow me into Elfland and show a token of his visit and tell what he had seen there. Now that I have confessed how all the former shepherds on this farm met their deaths because of me, I hope that I shall not be blamed for what I did unwillingly; for up to now there has been no man bold enough to explore the way to the underworld and visit the abode of the elves, except this hero, who has set me free from my curse and its enchantment; and for his deed he shall be rewarded ere all is done.

"And now you have my hearty thanks, who have all treated me well; but I shall stay no longer here, for I am filled with a longing for my home."

And with these words, Queen Hildur vanished, and she has never since been seen in the world of men.

As for the shepherd, it is told that he married and set up house the following spring. The farmer was generous to him when he went away and did not let him leave empty handed.

He became the most thriving farmer in the district, and peo-

pie always went to him for help and advice. His popularity and good luck were so great that men had never known the like, and it was as if every beast on his farm, as the saying goes, was born with two heads. But he would say that all his luck was due to Hildur the elf queen.

The feminine power in this story is obviously Hildur. The interesting thing is that she is not known at all in her true nature when the story begins. She is, in fact, thought to be an ordinary, if somewhat mysterious, woman, and her function in the economy of the tale is that of a servant. Hence she is very much taken for granted and used by the human world, as we always tend to use and take for granted the powers at our disposal, not inquiring as to their source. They are our servants and we are their master.

This assumption that power lies totally in our hands has fateful consequences. Not only is the true quality of the life that Hildur represents completely unknown to us, but her essential power is badly distorted. The true feminine is forced into a state of degradation that cries out over and over for relief: for that is the meaning of the repeated deaths of the unlucky shepherds, who represent unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem. Until it is solved, and the underground power is restored to its royal place at the center, life will drain fruitlessly away.

The turning point of the story is actually the point at which the farmer decides not to hire any more shepherds—decides, that is, to stop this terrible waste of life. In doing this, he is also admitting that power is not totally in his hands. There is a problem here over which he has no control; the one thing he *can* do is give up carrying on "business as usual" and pretending that all is well.

By this admission the farmer has allowed healing forces to be set in motion, for control must be relinquished before any new possibility can take shape. The very moment that he gives up his flock—whose care is extraordinarily important to him—to fate or to God, is the moment when a new, unheard-of person appears on the scene, a person who seems both aware and completely confident. At this point the story line passes from the farmer to this stranger, the new shepherd. Or, in other words, a new kind of *consciousness* takes over, which is going to experience the feminine power in a

wholly different way, releasing it from the constriction created by the previous attitude.

It is obvious, from the experience of the new hero, that the former shepherds, who met their deaths at the hands of Hildur every Christmas, were overpowered by her. They never released themselves from the bondage or her witch-bridle, because they could not stay awake: they were totally bewitched. It is interesting that the feminine power was experienced in such apparently contradictory ways. On the one hand, it was distorted into the servant of masculine consciousness, as Hildur was housekeeper to the farmer; but on the other, it was an irresistible and terrible destroyer of men, as Hildur's secret curse reveals. But this apparent contradiction is no contradiction at all. It is when the feminine is degraded and not known for itself that it takes on negative and possessive aspects. This can be seen very clearly both in relationships and in the connection with one's own inner feminine being. There is only one kind of attitude that releases us from this double tyranny, and that is the attitude of the successful shepherd, who is willing to stay with Hildur, follow where she leads, and understand who she truly is and always was.

Not only does the shepherd stay awake and follow willingly; he becomes, by disappearing in invisibility, a truly faithful observer, a pure awareness in whose light Hildur and her real background can appear for the first time. The difference between Hildur as servant of man and as reigning queen is so vast that it should make us forever skeptical of premature and foolish judgments about the nature of this feminine power, no matter in what form it may seem to manifest itself. We must continually check our own attitudes, for it is these that determine the whole nature and quality of the feminine presence that we meet.

Thus the reality of the elf queen emerges along with the source of her problem, that curse which was laid upon her by her spiteful mother-in-law. The curse is the generally human curse of discrimination. The king's mother decided that the elf-maiden was not good enough for her son: by her attitude she set up that division into high and low, good and bad, upper world and underworld from which the true feminine being suffers most of all, since its nature and fulfillment lie in wholeness, oneness, and peace. It is, in fact, a false feminine power which has seemed to be in charge: the witch-power

of the mother-in-law represents that very illusion of total control from which the farmer's world suffered at the beginning of the story. This is indeed a curse, fatally suppressing and distorting the real sources of life and happiness, which are always to be found in relation to a wider truth lying beyond the domain of ego manipulation.

The solution to the whole problem of the distortion of the feminine is to be found in seeing and understanding truly. This is proved by the outcome of our fairy tale. Because a human consciousness has gone beyond its own limits to penetrate into the reality of the feminine power—because, in doing so, it has gone beyond *itself*—the order of life has been restored. The shepherd's act of generosity has placed Hildur back on the throne that is rightfully hers. That is, false views of the feminine have been discarded for the true one, and in this process the world is set right: there is harmony within and a corresponding enrichment without. The happiness of the restored queen quite naturally results in blessings for the shepherd, but not because he ever sought them. It is because he sought to know her that she can respond with her whole being, which is now known. This knowing is what can make real and sustaining the true power of the feminine, in whatever form we encounter it in our lives.

REFERENCE

¹ "Hildur The Elf Queen" reprinted from *Mead Moondaughter and Other Icelandic Folk Tales*; translated and adapted by Alan Boucher, © 1967 by the author. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Chilton Book Co., Radnor, PA.