The magic formula put to the test: Propp's fourteenth function applied to Bavarian fairy tales

La formula magica messa alla prova: la quattordicesima funzione di Propp applicata alle fiabe bavaresi

SILVIE LANG

ABSTRACT

Vladimir Propp identified magic as a core function of fairy tales. This article applies Propp's fourteenth function to Bavarian fairy tales from oral tradition, collected by Franz Schönwerth. By incorporating the international classification system of Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther, this paper extends Propp's approach beyond just tales of magic: South German animal tales, religious tales, tales of the stupid ogre, anecdotes and jokes, and formula tales all feature magical agents.

Vladimir Propp identificò la magia come una funzione centrale delle fiabe. L'articolo si propone di applicarla alle fiabe bavaresi di tradizione orale, raccolte da Franz Schönwerth ed estende l'approccio di Propp ad altri generi di fiabe, incorporando il sistema di classificazione internazionale di Aarne, Thompson e Uther: le fiabe di animali della Germania meridionale, le fiabe religiose, le fiabe dell'orco stupido, gli aneddoti, le barzellette e le fiabe a formula presentano tutti agenti magici.

PAROLE CHIAVE*: magic, fairy tale, formalism.*

PAROLE CHIAVE*: magia, fiaba, formalismo*

AUTORE

Silvie Lang (Dr. phil.) is a research assistant at the Institute of German Studies at the University of Kassel. She completed her doctorate on the fairy tales of Franz Xaver von Schönwerth. Her research interests include fairy tales and folklore, comparative analyses of motifs, and the interplay between orality and writing.
silvie-lang@uni-kassel.de

The fairy tale as a genre with a central magical motif has fascinated the world ever since the Grimm brothers' collecting efforts in the nineteenth century, as exemplified by Walt Disney's numerous fairy tale film adaptations.[1] In his attempt to capture the fairy tale formally, Vladimir Propp identifies magic as a core function: the acquisition of a magical agent serves as the driving force of the plot,[2] the fourteenth function out of 31. Propp divides this magical agent into four categories: «(1) animals [...]; (2) objects out of which magical helpers appear [...]; (3) objects possessing a magical property [...]; (4) qualities or capacities which are directly given, such as the power of transformation into animals».[3]

Propp's analysis underlies a corpus of Russian fairy tales from the collection *Narodnye russkie skazki* (1855-1863) by Alexander Afánas'ev;[4] this article applies Propp's fourteenth function to unpublished Bavarian fairy tales from oral tradition, collected by Franz Xaver von Schönwerth (1810-1886). By incorporating the international classification system of Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther (ATU),[5] this paper extends Propp's approach that comprised only tales of magic:[6] South German animal tales, tales of magic, religious tales, tales of the stupid ogre, anecdotes and jokes, and formula tales all feature magical agents. Contrary to being a mere motif, magic emerges as a central function across most categories of fairy tales. This shows in the relationship between magic and plot dynamics we find reflected in different formal forms of the fairy tale. Only such formally verified insights into narrative tradition make it possible to draw conclusions about the understanding of reality in earlier cultures.

Schönwerth collected his material in the Upper Palatinate in eastern Bavaria, Germany. In my dissertation project on the unpublished fairy tales of Schönwerth, I analysed 470 fairy tales from a largely oral tradition and classified them according the ATU system. Each category (e.g. animal tales, tales of magic, ecc.) comprises various subcategories. Among these, I diplomatically transcribed the texts of the most quantitatively represented tale types, and in a few cases, all the texts of certain tale types, resulting in a total of 158 transcriptions. They built the basis for the following analysis. To avoid duplication, this paper does not consider variants that represent written adaptations of oral material. What remains is a corpus that is purely oral

---

[1] L. Röhrich, *Märchen und Wirklichkeit*, Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, Wiesbaden 1974, Vorwort zur dritten Auflage.
[2] V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trad. di L. Scott, University of Texas Press, Austin 1968, p. 43.
[3] Ivi, pp. 43-44.
[4] Ivi, pp. 156-158.
[5] H. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson,* Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 2004.
[6] V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* cit., p. 10.

tradition, represents a diversity of types, and at the same time focusses on tales the rural population told particularly frequently in nineteenth century Bavaria, overall: 120 texts. Tales of magic represent the biggest group with 38 percent, followed by animal tales with 17 percent and religious tales with 15 percent. Only eleven percent of realistic tales are represented, nine percent of tales of the stupid ogre, eight percent of anecdotes and jokes, and two percent of formula tales.
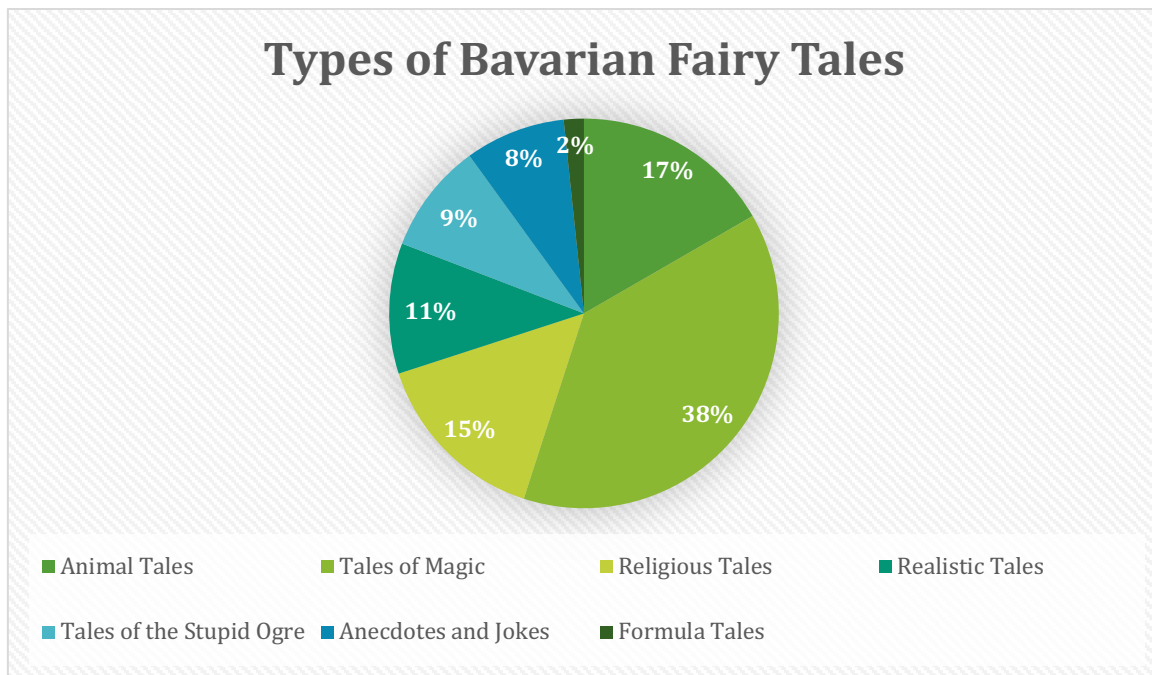

FIG. 1 – Types of Bavarian fairy tales selected to test Propp's fourteenth function.

Concerning animal tales, there are five subcategories according to Uther.[7] In the first two categories, «Wild Animals» and «Wild Animals and Domestic Animals», the Bavarian fairy tales function without magical agents, although there is a magical basis assumption: animals talk. Yet for the following categories, «Wild Animals and Humans», «Domestic Animals», and «Other Animals and Objects», every fairy tale includes a magical agent, namely an animal, Propp's subcategory one. The animal, a fox in tale type ATU 155 (The Ungrateful Snake Returned to Captivity), a hornet in ATU 212 (The Lying Goat), and a snake in ATU 285 (The Child and the Snake) always comes to the rescue of the hero who can be a human or an animal.

The tales of magic prove to be more diverse. Magical agents appear in all subcategories represented in Schönwerth's unpublished collection. A strong focus however lies on Propp's categories one and three, animals as magical agents as well as

---

[7] H. UTHER, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* cit., Part I, p. 5.

objects possessing magical property. Only tale type ATU 300 (The Dragon-Slayer) features the second magical agent: objects out of which magical helpers appear. The tales of magic represent a huge variety of animals as magical agents. The most obvious distinction lies in realistic and fantastic animals. Only one supernatural creature appears though: a griffin. Concerning realistic animals, we can divide between mammals (dogs, cats, foxes and cows), birds (swans, doves, and chicken), fishes (a goldfish), amphibs (frogs and toads), and reptiles (snakes). Objects possessing magical property can be clothes (ribbons, slippers, and crowns), weapons (bows and rifles), natural objects in a broader sense (wands and branches), food (cake), tools (a bobbin), cultural buildings (a well), and musical instruments (violins and whistles).

Magical objects are the only magical agents in the first, second, third and fifth category of religious tales, comprising bottles filled with magic fluids, skeletons that help to riches, bags full of money, a container of water, an armchair of red velvet, and a pot filled with shit that transforms into money. It seems important to note, though, that most tales have no magical agent at all. The fourth subcategory of the religious tales that concerns itself with the devil in specific[8] features an animal as magical agent (a dog killing the devil) as well as Propp's fourth category: qualities or capacities directly given. In two texts religion functions as a magical quality: the heroes become clergymen and are thus able to defeat the devil.

The realistic tales as a subcategory of fairy tales according to Uther[9] are, little surprising, the only category of fairy tales that work without magical agents. This empirically supports what research has long stated: the defining characteristics compared to the fairy tale are the absence of magic and miracle motifs and stronger references to reality; the supernatural helpers and magic gifts are replaced by wise counsellors or the hero's own cleverness, coincidence, or the providence of fate.[10]
Of Propp's categories, only the first – animals as magical agents – applies to the stories of the stupid ogre. In almost all the texts, these magical agents are birds. However, in one text, a fly serves this role. This highlights a striking contrast in size: very small animals, often capable of flight, help to defeat much larger creatures – namely ogres and giants – a phenomenon that the fairy tale scholar Lutz Röhrich refers to as «polar opposites».[11]

The strong preference for magical agents from Propp's first and third categories – animals and objects – is also evident in the Bavarian corpus of anecdotes and jokes, with a clear predominance of animals, including a crayfish, a fly, and a horse. The

---

[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] C. SHOJAEI KAWAN, *Novellenmärchen*, in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a cura di R. W. Brednich, H. Bausinger, W. Brückner, H. Gerndt, L. Röhrich e K. Roth, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2002, p. 126.
[11] L. RÖHRICH, *Märchen und Wirklichkeit* cit., p. 236.

only magical object encountered is a seed. This finding is remarkable, as these anecdotes and jokes do not primarily focus on magical events at the thematic level.[12]

The final category of tale types consists of formula tales, represented by two texts in the corpus. Both are variants of tale type ATU 2021 (The Rooster and the Hen). While one variant lacks a magical agent and ends with death, the other suggests that water serves as a magical object, saving the hero from death. This narrative logic aligns with cultural history, where water is often endowed with magical properties in folk customs.[13]

Overall, animals are the most common magical helpers, appearing in 54 per cent of the texts in the Bavarian corpus, followed closely by magical objects at 42 per cent. Only two fairy tales feature directly bestowed magical qualities – both religious tales in which religion itself acts as the source of magic. Only one tale features an object from which a magical helper emerges: a book containing a spirit named Hans, who loyally serves the hero.
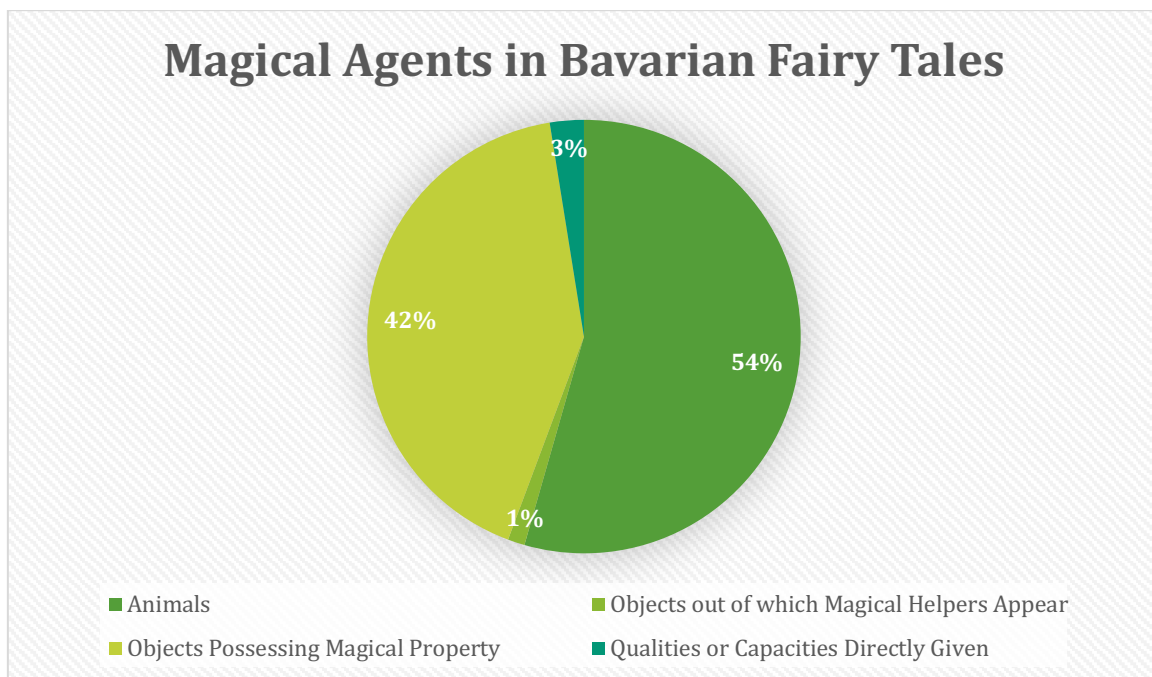

FIG. 2 – Magical agents in the selection of fairy tales collected by Schönwerth.

[12] H. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* cit., Part. II, p. 5.
[13] A. Johns, *Wasser*, in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a cura di R. W. Brednich, H. Bausinger, W. Brückner, D. Drascek, H. Gerndt, I. Köhler-Zülch, K. Roth e H. Uther, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2014, p. 501.

When it comes to animals as magical agents, there is a diverse distribution across various species. However, one animal stands out clearly, representing 23 percent of the occurrences: the snake, followed equally by foxes and dogs at 14 percent each. The variety of magical objects is equally diverse, with branches from a nut bush being the most common. Magical cakes and violins also appear frequently. This tripartite classification highlights an intriguing distinction: on one hand, nature (represented by branches) serves as a magical agent; on the other hand, food and music play their roles as well.

Since animals represent the most prominent group of magical agents in the Bavarian corpus, it is worth examining the underlying logic of these fairy tales. Given their quantitative predominance, the tales featuring snakes as magical helpers serve as the textual foundation. In total, there are ten texts that include snakes as magical agents: nine of these incorporate the animal tale ATU 285 (The Child and the Snake), while one includes the magical tale ATU 672 (The Serpent's Crown).

ATU 285 tells the following: «A child shares its milk with a snake. When the mother sees this, she fears for her child and kills the snake. Soon the child becomes ill and dies».[14] This prototype alone does not lead to an animal becoming a helper. Schönwerth's variants of the tale type, however, often present a rare variation in which the snake appears as a magical agent and brings about happiness. In these texts, the snake departs without harming the child, or it is explicitly stated that the shared meal between the child and the snake results in the child's happiness. The serpent in these fairy tales should be understood as a magical being, a fantastic creature, often depicted wearing a crown. In various texts, the snake either gives its crown to the child or the parents or loses it, leading the family to become wealthy in money or food. One text even describes a bond of friendship between the child and the snake, serving as the happy ending of that particular story.

ATU 672 «comprises various tales dealing with a serpent's crown».[15] In these tales, either the serpent itself acts as magical agent or its crown does. In the fairy tale «Hausschlange», that translates into "house snake", the viper leaves its crown on a cloth only after being tolerated as a dinner guest by the two children. Therefore, the act of leaving the crown, which brings happiness, is solely an action of the magical creature itself. In contrast, in stories where the crown is stolen, the situation is different.

---

[14] H. UTHER, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* cit., Part I, p. 165.
[15] Ivi, p. 368.

In Europe, the term "house snake" usually refers to the grass snake, more rarely the adder.[16] In Schönwerth's fairy tales, the snake certainly also refers to the grass snake, as it is the most common and most widespread snake in Germany and can also be found in the Fichtel mountains where Schönwerth collected the stories.[17] It appears as the predominant snake species in Schönwerth's variants of ATU 285 and ATU 672. In only one story is there mention of the «oda», which probably refers to the adder, which is known to occur in the Fichtel mountains.[18] Sigrid Schmidt sees the motif of the serpent's crown primarily in connection with ancient animal symbolism; however, she does not rule out a scientific interpretation of the pattern of the snake's head.[19] The adder in particular has a head pattern that can be recognised as a crown.

Specific features of the animal world, such as a crown-like head pattern, serve as inspiration for magic in fairy tales. Additionally, elements from the plant world are reflected in these stories, often aligning with Propp's fourteenth function. In the Bavarian corpus, branches from trees and bushes are the most common magical objects. They appear in the category of magical tales, specifically within texts that can be categorized under the well-known tale type ATU 510A (Cinderella), appearing in seven out of nine variants. Already in the prototype description there is mention that Cinderella «obtains beautiful clothing from a supernatural being […] or a tree that grows on the grave of her deceased mother».[20] In the manuscript «Aschenflügel», translated as "Ash Wing", the heroine is called Marie. After her mother's death, her father remarries a cruel woman who mistreats her new stepdaughter. Marie's only wish is to attend church like her stepsisters. Unlike other tales, there is no grave from which a magic tree grows; instead, Marie asks her father to bring her a present from the funfair – specifically, something that will bump against the tip of his hat on the way home. The magical object is found in a forest, where her father's hat strikes a hazelnut tree, leaving a twig hanging. Eventually, Marie loses the twig in a deep well and begins to cry. The twig imbues the well with magical powers, allowing it to speak and providing Marie with beautiful clothes and golden slippers, enabling her to attend church at last.

---

[16] W. SCHERF, *Kind und Schlange (AaTh 285)*, in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a cura di R. W. Brednich, H. Bausinger, W. Brückner, L. Röhrich, K. Roth e R. Schenda, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1993, p. 1241.

[17] R. GÜNTHER, *Die Amphibien und Reptilien Deutschlands*, Spektrum, Heidelberg 2009, p. 673.

[18] Ivi, p. 717.

[19] S. SCHMIDT, *Schlangenkrone, -stein*, in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a cura di R. W. Brednich, H. Bausinger, W. Brückner, D. Drascek, H. Gerndt, I. Köhler-Zülch, L. Röhrich e K. Roth, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2007, p. 58.

[20] H. UTHER, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* cit., Part I, p. 283.

The second variant unfolds in a very similar way. The heroine, named «Aschafli-gel» (dialect for "Ash Wing"), asks her father to bring her something from his journey. As he passes under a hazel tree, a bunch of six nuts falls onto his hat. Aschafligel eventually loses the nuts in the well, but the outcome differs. A little man appears and informs the heroine about the new magical powers of the well. When she reaches into the well, all the dirt is washed away, and beautiful clothes materialize before her: golden shoes, white silk stockings, and a lovely dress. Additionally, two turtle doves perch on her shoulders. Only then does the young woman go to church.

In the third variant, the father brings his daughter a fir branch and a twig from a hazelnut tree. This gift inexplicably leads to the unexpected arrival of a nobleman who wishes to marry.

After the two stepsisters unsuccessfully mutilate themselves to pass the ring and shoe tests, Aschenflügl ultimately proves to be the true bride. The twigs are never mentioned again after the initial gift and are implicitly tied to the magic of the plot.

The fourth variant is a fragment that lacks an ending. Here, the heroine loses the bunch of nuts brought by her father in the well, which then promises to produce two velvet and silk turtle doves. The fifth version, which is similarly fragmentary, also features a green branch from the forest that the father brings home. The heroine can throw this branch into the well to obtain whatever she desires. When she returns the items to the well, she retrieves the green twig, which serves as a pledge. The sixth variant, again fragmentary, deals with the magical object more implicitly, similar to the third variant, with limited information provided by the fragments. The father accidentally bumps into a hazel branch and places the twig on his hat. Without any further action, a wolf appears seamlessly in the next sentence, demanding the youngest daughter's hand in marriage. Once again, the twig triggers a supernatural event. The final variant resembles the previous ones, with the heroine receiving a bunch of nuts that have fallen on her father's hat. These nuts fall into the well, which then provides her with clothes for her Sunday best.

A network according to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, short ANT, illustrates compelling connections here, without having to pursue causal-logical causes, because the network «may be local, it may have no compulsory paths, no strategically positioned nodes.»[21] At the centre of this network is a green twig, specifically the twig of a nut tree or bush, which allows us to trace connections to various other actors: (1) the heroine, Cinderwing, who unconsciously desires the twig, (2) her father, who accidentally bumps into it, and (3) the well into which the twig falls and evokes magic. The well seems to be the most unstable element of this network, as

[21] B. Latour, *On actor-network theory: A few clarifications*, in «Soziale Welt», xlvii, 4, 1996, p. 369.

magic can operate independently of it, as demonstrated in various variants of Schönwerth. The ANT

> aims at describing the very nature of societies. But to do so it does not limit itself to human individual actors, but extends the word actor – or actant – to *non-human, non-individual* entities. Whereas social network adds information on the relations of humans in a social and natural world which is left untouched by the analysis, ANT aims at accounting for the very essence of societies and natures.[22]

Nature itself, whether in the form of twigs and branches or as animals – particularly snakes – embodies the essence of this more-than-human network that includes humans, animals, nature, and even cultural constructs like the well. The analysed fairy tales appear to convey a reminder that specific plants and animals possess a kind of magic that aids the heroes in achieving their happy endings.

A magical nature emerges as the most common form of magic in the selected corpus of Bavarian fairy tales from oral tradition. However, Propp's fourteenth function appears to be a placeholder that can be filled in various ways. The two texts from the corpus that fall under Propp's subcategory 4 (qualities or capacities which are directly given) demonstrate how religion functions as a form of magic. Both texts incorporate the tale type ATU 811 (The Man Promised to the Devil Becomes a Clergyman) from the category of religious tales. These tales generally tell about a man who «sprinkles holy water on the devils in hell [...] and tears up the contract his father had once concluded with the devil».[23] In Schönwerth's two variants, two sons become clergymen after being promised to the devil by their fathers. In both tales, the sons outsmart the devil through trickery; however, they are only able to succeed due to their prior religious training. The overlapping of religion and magic is also known in other fairy tale types like ATU 1168 (Various Ways of Ecorcising Devils) in which the crucifix as a symbol of Christianity functions as a magical object in fighting off the devil.

Considering all subcategories of Propp's fourteenth function, written literature emerges as the fourth carrier of magic in fairy tales. Only in one text, a variant of the tale of magic ATU 300 (The Dragon-Slayer), do we encounter subcategory 2 (objects out of which magical helpers appear). ATU 300 generally comprises tales in which a young man overcomes a dragon to rescue a princess.[24] In one of Schönwerth's variants, the hero with the intriguing name of Lampartus – possibly a reference to St

---

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] H. UTHER, *The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* cit., Part I, p. 453.

[24] Ivi, p. 174.

Lambert (635-705)[25] – gains his power through an object that produces a magical helper: a little book from which Hans emerges, although he is not described in detail. Hans is ready to follow any orders from Lampartus and hides the bodies of enemies slain by his master. The book serves as a magical object because, as philologist Eric A. Havelock suggests, both oral and written literature possess an inherent social and didactic function: «that of preserving the tradition by which [a society] lived and instructing them in it.»[26] As Pertti Anttonen, Cecilia af Forselles, and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander put it, «tradition is made accessible for general reading audiences».[27] In orally transmitted fairy tales, the intriguing interplay between orality and writing is evident even at the diegetic level.

In conclusion, the Bavarian fairy tales collected by Franz Xaver von Schönwerth reveal the centrality of magical agents across a wide range of narrative types, supporting Vladimir Propp's analysis of the fairy tale genre. While Propp's fourteenth function – acquisition of a magical agent – proves essential in driving the plot, the tales analysed extend beyond his original corpus of Russian tales to include a broader diversity of motifs, magical agents, and narrative structures. Animals, especially snakes, and objects, like branches and cakes, are the most frequent magical agents in the Bavarian corpus, showcasing how elements of nature imbue the fairy tale with transformative power. The snake, especially the adder, also proves to be a magical force in the folk beliefs of the Upper Palatinate, even as a force of nature itself. In the village of Neuenhammer in the nineteenth century, it was believed that fiery adders shot out of swamps from deep within the earth.[28] The same anchoring in popular belief applied to branches as components of trees: the Upper Palatinate people attributed a kind of personality to trees and woodworkers even asked the tree for forgiveness before they laid axe to it.[29] In addition, the forest maiden, a forest spirit, was known to demand cakes from the human population.[30]

Furthermore, religious qualities and written literature also function as carriers of magic, enriching the tales with both symbolic and practical significance. This study demonstrates that magic is not merely a decorative motif but a core function that shapes the narrative and reflects deeper cultural understandings of reality. The

---

[25] The reliquary of St Lambert in the treasury of St Paul's Cathedral in Liège in Belgium shows St Lambert with an open book in his hand, presumably the Bible.
[26] E. A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1986, p. 8.
[27] P. Anttonen, C. Forselles e K. Salmi-Niklander, *Introduction: Oral Tradition and Book Culture*, in *Oral Tradition and Book Culture*, a cura di P. Anttonen, C. Forselles e K. Salmi-Niklander, Studia Fennica Folkloristica, Helsinki 2018, p. 10.
[28] F. Schönwerth, *Aus der Oberpfalz. Sitten und Sagen. Zweyter Theil*, Matth. Rieger'sche Buchhandlung, Augsburg 1858, p. 82.
[29] Ivi, pp. 334-335.
[30] Ivi, pp. 378-379.

idea of animal peace already appears in the Old Testament in the Book of Isaiah (11,6-9) and can therefore be understood as the basis for Schönwerth's fairy tales, in which children and snakes feed together and take care of each other – a thesis that seems all the more plausible as the play of infant and adder and child and viper is explicitly taken up in Isaiah.[31] By analysing these unpublished Bavarian tales through Propp's framework and the ATU classification system, we gain insight into how nineteenth-century Bavarian rural populations conceptualized their world, highlighting the interplay between nature, culture, and the supernatural in their oral traditions.

---

[31] G. Lorenz, *Tiere im Leben der alten Kulturen: Schriftlose Kulturen, Alter Orient, Ägypten, Griechenland und Rom*, Innsbruck University press, Innsbruck 2013, pp. 280-281.