VEGETABLE, ANIMAL, HUMAN
The Perils and Powers of Transgressing
(Sociobiological) Boundaries in Narrative

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Bible myths, fairy tales, and science fictions all offer narratives that imply and sometimes question boundaries for human behavior. By subscription to certain narratives, individuals can enter and leave social groups; by evolving narratives, groups can adjust the realm of the allowable and the realm of the forbidden; and by selective transgression, individuals can gain power beyond that initially granted by the group. All these functions of narrative contribute to the sociobiological vigor of the individuals and groups that subscribe to them, suggesting that the creation and use of narratives has proadaptive functions.

KEY WORDS: Evolutionary aesthetics; Narrative; Bible myth; Fairy tale; Science fiction; Transgression; Boundaries.

OVERVIEW

In order to discuss some proadaptive features of narrative as a human activity, I intend to focus on three varieties (stages sorts) of narrative—Bible Myths, Fairy Tales, and Science Fiction—because of their acknowledged symbolic power for constructing our socially inhabited world.

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Each is notorious for suggesting that humans must remain within well-defined boundaries (Bible Myths, Ten Commandments; Fairy Tales, “Little Red Riding Hood”; Science Fiction, “there are some things man was not meant to know,” for example, in U.S. xenophobic films of the 1950s). These boundaries correspond to categories that are simultaneously social and biological, such as “Thou shalt not kill,” stages of sexual maturity, and the maintenance of “natural” order (Them!). In fact, however, while projecting a world that is and ostensibly should be well bounded (“Eat all vegetation but not the fruit of that tree”), these narrative varieties portray individual episodes that reward transgression (for example, Adam becoming godlike; Abel learning to kill and eat animals). In other words, these narratives are about the individual in the (socially constructed) world and typically about the individual uncomfortable in that world.

While some scholars argue that virtually all “knowledge is stories” (Schank 1990:1), the need for these particular narratives, and for their projections of shifting boundaries, arises from two sociobiologically important realities: the changing needs of the individual growing into new social and biological functions and the changing needs of a population growing into new territories or dealing with changing environmental conditions. The capacity of narrative to coordinate the needs of the individual with those of the group and to share this coordination within a group provides a social matrix that allows for individual subscription to groups (for example, which god do you follow?). Subscription, then, provides a way into groups other than by birth and, like circumcision, may constitute a rite of passage, with subscription having the advantage of being highly repeatable. Having broken into the (adult) world through subscription to a culturally shared narrative, one has faced the perils of transgression imaginatively, and now may gain the powers of transgression materially. Thus these narratives serve sociobiological functions for the group, allowing it to solidify its self-definition by exploring its limits, helping it coordinate its activities, and thus making it function more efficiently, which should and typically does lead to an increase in its population.

Those groups that have compelling narratives are more likely to survive than those that don’t. The cloudy history of the now-lost Khazars is a case in point (Pavić 1989). At the same time, subscription to a narrative aids the individual by allowing entrance into a group which will provide protection, mates, and so on. Speaking historically and roughly, Bible Myths and Fairy Tales emphasize the useful transgression of the vegetable and animal kingdoms while Science Fiction emphasizes the useful transgression of the human kingdom (Rabkin in press). These sociobiological functions are ever more needful as technological devel-