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Gender-Role Perceptions in the Akan Folktale

Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang

The vital role that the folktale plays in the process of socialization in society has been recognized by critics like Bruno Bettelheim who provides insight into the pedagogical value of fairy tales. Usually in the primary oral culture the folktale constitutes a major, early source for the liberation of the imagination. Built largely on fantasy, the tale has therapeutic, emotional, and cathartic usefulness as well as didactic functions. This literary art form provides a passageway through which society confirms its strengths and growth strategies, while inducting new generations into its life-flow. The influence of the tale is felt even more strongly in oral cultures than in those that are script-centered. This paper does not share in Walter Ong's dichotomy between "primary oral" and "chirographic" cultures (16-30). The cultural fusions that take place within and between villages, towns, and suburbs are in reality much more complex than a simple binary division between "oral" and "written." The paper agrees to a limited extent with the manner in which Deborah Tannen marks "orality" because she shows the issue as a flexible strategy for speaking and communicating employed by literate speakers as well (326-47).

The tale may be seen as a social leveler in the sense that during the performance of the tale, barriers that would separate the sexes, classes, and age groups in other social contexts are broken. As a result one finds children, women, and men, the rich and the poor gather at the same venue to share in this ancient oral literary art form. Both women and men narrate tales either in the setting of the hearth or as professionals during clearly defined social events (see Okpewho).

While the narrator may become a performer in the process of the narration, the audience plays the multiple functions of listener and active participant-commentator, actor, or musician (see Finnegan; Dorson). The folktale is popular literary art in the true sense of the expression; it is a literary art form directly created, controlled, and enjoyed by the people across space and time. When in the telling, for example, a member of the audience contributes to the narration with a statement such as "I was a witness to this event," or when the narrator directs a phrase such as "You should have seen this for yourself," or a sentence such as "My children, you must listen carefully to what this animal said . . ." to the audience, the comments serve to obscure the passage of time by suggesting that once upon a time is now, and that in the world of the tale the past and the present can converge. The tale, together with its importance, is thus drawn from a distant past and made to approximate the realities of the present time.

These and other similar comments are sometimes made in order to create the space for a song or a contribution, or to allow for a reversal of roles between narrator and audience. The intervention may also be made so as to slow down the flow of the narration or to underscore the effectiveness and relevance of the story for the rest of the audience. The remarks

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are obviously fictive in the mode of the tall tale, but they are appropriate here because they meet the improvisatory element in the folktale. More than these, the interventions allow the narrative to make claims to occupy a hermetic space by drawing attention to itself as a tale. The listening and active audience is expected to adhere to the morals of the tale, having collectively participated in their formulation.

The context of the narration allows the artist, the audience, and the critic to operate at the same time and place. The audience for any particular performance or narration is immediately identifiable, and the impact on the audience is relatively readily ascertained. This relationship between narrator and audience in a performance is different from the one created by the written text that comes to the reader and critic as a finished product. Therefore this is a sense in which the oral narrator is obliged, even while s/he is still in the process of creation, to abide by the demands of the critic and adhere to the "truth" of a familiar text while upholding the aesthetic principles of the art. This is not to deny the freedom of the narrator. The artist is expected to conform to the familiar contours of the well-known tale and earn the approval of the audience according to some shared aesthetic criteria for a good narration. These include, among others, the firm grasp of the attention of the audience, adept and liquid uses of the language, the creation of suspense and humor, the logical development of events, the ability to open avenues of operation for the imagination, and the relevance of the moral of the tale to the lives of the audience. The artistic freedom lies in how s/he manipulates known structures and meets expectations of the audience for excellence in narration and performance.

This can be illustrated with a tale that is favored among collectors. This tale also forms the basis of Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* (1970), Nurrudin Farah's novel *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), and the Ghanaian filmmaker Kwaw Ansa's very popular film, "Love Brewed in an African Pot" (1980). These are a few of the many texts that appear to be based on this tale. The story is about a beautiful young woman who refuses to have her marriage arranged as custom demands. She chooses her own husband and ends unhappy. This is a narrative line that can be realized in an almost infinite number of ways. The constant factors or functions (see Propp), or motifeme (see Dundes), as the numerous version of this tale certify, are that the woman was beautiful, had a will of her own, got married without much regard for convention, but did not live happily ever after. The moral is also the same in each version: the woman should not protest too much, and (male) elders know best. However, the details vary widely concerning her physical make-up, how the (anti)heroine shuns her suitors, and the manner of her ending. Writers and narrators who make use of this oral source may therefore bring their own diverse interpretations and artistic competence to bear in weighing and clarifying the details and ending of the tale (Opoku-Agyemang 5-12).

The tale's narrator has the added option, apart from fleshing out the details of a known tale, to create an entirely new tale. S/he would please the audience both by the weight of the message and how it is carried. Thus the number of folktales in a given culture has the potential for expansion and

for tuning the content of the tale to meet current realities, including shared values. Seen in this way the folktale becomes a body of growing narratives that reflect the dynamism and testament of society. One can even argue that the folktale offers a closer account of the values of society than other forms of written, imaginative texts, given the context for the creation in both literary forms.

These contentions raise questions about the comparative status of the written tale that provides the primary source for this paper, or indeed for any body of collected, transcribed, and translated folktales, for two major reasons. First, the written text may conveniently be seen as the product of the labor of a single identified person, also known as the author. The creation of this written text may not have taken place in the context of performance. Second, even if the written tale is the direct product of field work, the limitations of conventional orthography will make it impossible for the written tale to carry with it all those paralinguistic devices that give the tale its life. This paper remains mindful of these limitations and asserts that within the setting and its “untranslatable,” life-giving paraphernalia (atmosphere, music, laughter, gestures, grunts, dance, tone, puns, etc.) is inscribed a text that we can subject to criticism.

Those concerns aside, it is likely that the gender and ideology of both the narrator and the collector of the tale would influence its selection and placement of emphasis (Belsey 56-84). I recall my own experience in the field when I was trying to find out if, overall, the male narrators told thematically and stylistically different tales from the female narrators. While the male narrators appear to have told one erotic tale too many, the women told me tales that focused mainly on the plight of women. This is not to suggest that men are gross pleasure-seekers or that women are whiners. Rather, it is to show how gender can become a determining factor in the selection of the tale and its telling, as can be illustrated by examples from the written text.

The famous Ananse tale in which the stories of the Sky-God become Ananse stories, as they are written by a woman and a man make interesting revelations about the influence of gender and ideology on the final product. In this story, the Sky-God will give his stories to anyone who can produce a dwarf, a cobra, and hornets. In Jane Osafoa Dankyi's version, Ananse, who is a contestant, goes home, consults his wife, and the two of them plan how best to procure those difficult and dangerous items. Ananse keeps informing his wife of his progress, and she drops pieces of advice (*Ananse Searches* 1-8). No woman is mentioned in S. Y. Manu's version of the tale, until Ananse is able, all on his own, to accomplish the feat and come home to boast to his family about “his powers” (1-8). Manu's ideal woman is seen “sweating all over from the kitchen chores” (37); she cooks, sets the table, and calls her husband: “Agya Ananse, food is ready: will you please have your dinner?” (40). In another of Dankyi's stories in the same collection, we see wife and husband sharing in household chores, including cooking, as in “The Barbecued Pork” where “both husband and wife roasted the meat on an open pit . . .” (*Ananse Searches* 30). In this respect, when we find the wife cooking her husband's favorite dish in “The Bean Stew” in the

same collection (19-25), we feel encouraged to interpret the activity as an expression of love and concern.

Expressions such as “since the head of the family was not happy, the wife and children were also in the same mood” (Toprah 1) and impolite language directed at women such as Manu’s “‘It is not for you to talk back,’ said Ananse angrily. ‘You should obey my instructions. Go at once without wasting any more time’” (36), or a wording like Ayeh’s “*asew, asem yi de, ense obea, ese obarima*” (98), meaning “My in-law, this [matter] is so serious that men and not women ought to tackle it” (trans. Opoku-Agyemang), are not very likely to be found in stories written by women. What may occur is the criticism against male irresponsibility as we find in Grace Omaboe’s *By the Fireside* (1995), a collection of ten tales written in dialogue. In “The Bearded Stone,” for example, Okonore tells her husband that she has been unable to cook because the whole house leaks badly. Their son Ntikuma openly sides with his mother. This fact so angers Ananse that he orders Ntikuma to leave the house. The following altercation ensues:

Afurudowhedohwe: Father, you can’t drive him out. That would be cruel.

Ananse: (Nodding) I see. You chaps have been schooled by your mother to be rude to me. Well, Okonore, you and your children, leave my wet house. Now!

All: (Defiantly) We are not leaving! (There is a scuffle. Agya Koo comes to separate them. Okonore tells him what has happened.)

Agya Koo: Hei, Ananse, what sort of man are you? Don’t you realize there is a lot of sense in what your family is saying? (47)

We may also find a tale that highlights the “hidden” powers of women, as in Peggy Appiah’s “Why the Cat Always Stays with Women” (112-14). In this tale Cat changes his friends according to the degree of physical strength they exhibit. He made friends with the elephant when the elephant killed the lion, and later with the hunter when the hunter killed the elephant. His friendship with the hunter ended when he saw the latter fleeing the wrath of a woman who was chasing him with a pestle; the hunter was screaming at the top of his voice, calling for people to save him. Cat decided from that day to stay close to woman, for, “now I know that someone is stronger than the man” (114).

There is no intention to oversimplify the complex issues of gender and ideology by suggesting that women writers of the tale would uniformly question received assumptions while male writers would enforce them. The stories used here to illustrate the various points made in this paper make allowance for strictly exo-gender ideology and lingual choices that go to support that idea that the issues are far more intricate than the earlier examples will allow. The point here is to demonstrate that the tale is not “innocent,” and that the gender and convictions of the writer bear on the final product.

Apart from the influence of gender and ideology on the collection, selection, and rendition of the tales, the peculiar demands of translation from one language to another allow for the insinuation of an alien way of

seeing and understanding the world of the tale, the slanting of perspective, or misinterpretation of an event or a behavior. For these reasons this paper draws on Akan tales written by both men and women, in the Akan languages of Akuapem, Asante Twi, and Mfantse, and in English and French, from different writers with particular ways of looking at their worlds and, presumably, from tales recorded or composed under various circumstances. Whenever possible, effort is made to refer to versions of a tale from more than one source, or from different tales making a similar point. Such a method should prove useful in arriving at a relatively "objective" view of gender role perceptions in the Akan folktale.

This paper discusses how expectations and attitudes concerning roles and behavior designated appropriate for a particular gender can be fathomed in the Akan folktale, a powerful verbal and dramatic art form, in the process of transmitting the norms of a largely nonliterate culture. The central argument is that the values that are transmitted in a setting that blurs class and gender distinctions, where both narrator and listener improvise and shape the total outcome of the tale, nevertheless have their clear ideological angles. The values enforce a way of seeing that is anchored on gender lines and in a manner that generally purports to create balance between the genders; however, the Akan folktale also has the potential to obstruct pathways to change and transformation, more specifically for the female gender. This paper will support its hypothesis by focusing on five interrelated areas: marriage, parenthood, work, self-worth, and authority.

Marriage

Since the eponymous male Ananse remains by right the central character in the Akan folktale, there is hardly ever the case where a female character is made the principal actor enough to impose a female perspective on the tales. The focus is always on Ananse's exploits and sometimes on those of his sons, of whom Kweku Tsen, or Ntikuma, also known as Ntsikuma, is the most intelligent, and the only one without a prominent deformity. His wife Okondor Yaa, or Okonore Yaa, also known as Aso, gains prominence only insofar as she plays a role in direct relation to her husband. There is no tale in which Okondor is a major character. Aso hardly has a verbal part to play in the tales in which she features except to wail at her husband's feigned deaths. In Appiah's "Why the Spider Has a Narrow Waist," the narrator provides a reason: "[S]he was not used to asking questions as Ananse was master in his home" (149-50). These words, coming as commentary from the narrator, are useful in inviting the listener to share in the narrator's own (mis)understanding of Ananse's behavior. However, they do not help the audience to determine Aso's own attitude toward the role she plays. Ananse has a daughter only in Hannah Dankwa-Smith's "How Ananse Outwitted Koroko," in a story in which the daughter is a simple tool (85-97). This picture of the Ananse family would set the tone for the examination of marriage in the folktale as a whole.

Marriage, both monogamous and polygamous, is heterosexual in the Akan folktale. There is not even the most indirect hint of sexual relations between members of the same sex. The closest would be R. S. Rattray's

“How It Came about that Many Diseases Came into the Tribe,” in which Ananse travels to a “certain village—at that village there was not a single male; all were women. Ananse married them all . . .” (77). Ananse’s swift matrimonial action, placed so closely behind the discovery of a village with women only, expresses what is perhaps a cultural intolerance of the possibility of a community of women without men. It also quickly makes this village conform to the larger picture of heterosexual relationships in the tale as a whole. I have found no story of a village of men only.

Major criteria for deciding the suitability of a husband are his ability to provide for his family, protect them, be honest, and know the proper norms of conduct. Agya Kweku got married only when he was rich enough to do so in “Naughty Kweku” by Dankwa-Smith (47-56), and Ntikuma hopes that his harvest would yield enough for the “bridal fee” (Dankyi, *Ananse Searches* 26). Ananse’s wife feels justified in giving him no food because he has failed to provide for the family (Toprah 17-19), while the woman in “Abotar” threatens to divorce her husband because he was unable to save their child from kidnappers (*Anansesem Ye Asisie* 3-5). Good looks are important (Rattray 45-47), but they are not as central as the groom’s economic standing. When Ananse and his friend set off to look for wives, the friend stood a better chance of attracting a partner than did Ananse, who wore what looked like his mother’s cover cloth (Ayeh 62-65). In Rattray’s version of a similar tale, Leopard, “adorned . . . with gold ornaments” is likely to find a mate sooner than Fly “who carries a sleeping mat on his head” (21).

The survival of the marriage depends largely on the man’s ability to feed his family. Even Ananse would rather die than face the “wan looks” of his hungry children (Manu 38). A pregnant woman whose husband is unable to provide sustenance is forced to pledge the unborn child in marriage to male characters in exchange for food (Rattray “How the Ntoro Called Aninie Came into the Tribe,” 201-03). This story shows how the woman’s fate in marriage can be decided even before she enters the world. In a tale from Rattray, “How Divorce Came into the Tribe,” a hunter’s wife threatens divorce because she is tired of surviving on rats, fish, and snails. She wants her husband to be a more successful hunter (243-45).

Sincerity and honesty are important marks of a good husband. While a hunter jeopardizes his marriage by hiding from his wife the proceeds from the sale of animals (Rattray “How the Salutation ‘Kuronto’ and ‘Buro’ Came to Be Used,” 235-37), Dog is unmarriageable because he is an incurable thief (Rattray “How It Came about that ‘Kraman the Dog Can Never be Cured of His Thieving Ways,” 321-35). Kwaku Ananse must always leave a human community because he has broken its norms, the most pronounced of which are his refusal to take care of his family and respect the rights of others. He causes the break-up of his marriage when, in Dankyi and Kitty Lloyd-Lawrence’s “The Yam Porridge,” he embarrasses his wife by stealing from his mother-in-law’s kitchen (*Firelight Fables* 1-4).

The ideal wife must be a good homemaker, primarily defined by the cooking and caring skills. A mysterious woman leaves cooked food and bathing water for a hunter. When he surprises her, his first words are: “If you have done these chores, we might as well live together as husband and

wife" (Ayeh "Nea enti a Abommofo annya Sika," 46-48). There is no emphasis here on other skills of the woman as a prerequisite for a good marriage. The implication is that she must depend somehow on the man and serve him. Although, generally, the groom is supposed to be financially solvent, one cannot conclude categorically that the yardstick for measuring the ideal bride would never be based on evidence of self-advancement. Although very rarely seen in the Akan folktale, a woman won the respect and confidence of her future husband by demonstrating her knowledge of interpreting symbols in "How Some One Got a Wife (and Also Saved) His Life by Means of Interpreting Symbols" (Rattray 103-05). Even here marriage is seen as a reward for the woman for saving a man's life. The wife is also expected to help with the provision of sustenance for the family, for in Rattray's "The Elders Say, 'Be It Your Kinsman, Husband or Any One at All Who Has Work to Do, If He Ask You, Help Him'" (sic; 141-45), Ananse's decision not to share the produce of his farm with his wife receives social approval because she had refused to help in its cultivation.

Humility is another admired characteristic of the ideal wife. In R. E. Arkou-Tewia Blisset's "Ama Sika" and Rattray's "How the Ntoro Called 'Aninie' Came into the Tribe" (201-03), a story that informs the Ghanaian highlife composer Nana Kwame Ampadu's "Aku Sika," the physically challenged young woman cheerfully endures the taunts and hostility of her co-contestants and in the end is rewarded by marriage to the prince. Such would be the desired qualities in a woman in marriage, and not the exercise of the intelligence, which is hastily dismissed as ill temper, the result of bad upbringing.

The story about the woman with a mind of her own and who makes her choice of a husband and lives to regret it is perhaps the most popular in which a young woman occupies a central position in the plot of a tale. This story offers us a specific view of the place of the woman in marriage. Versions of this tale can be found in "Abena and the Python" (Appiah, *Tales* 69-77); "Abena and the Bush Cow" (Appiah, *Why the Hyena* 36-39); "Oforiwa" (Ayeh 55-57); "Abena et l'oiseau" (Gyan 71-84); "The Marriage of Ananse's Daughter to the Snake" (Gyesi-Appiah 123-25); and "Abakoma" (Blisset 43-52). Rattray has six versions of this tale of the young woman who selects her own mate in *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (1930). These are: "How Some One Got a Wife (and Also Saved) His Life by Means of Interpreting symbols" (103-05); "How It Came about that Parrot's Tail Become Red" (171-73); "How the Ekuona Clan Came into the Tribe" (205-07); "Kwamena, the Tiered Ant-Hill, That Stands within the Buttress Roots" (271-73); and "How (the Ntoro, Called) 'Akyem Aboadee' Came into the Tribe" (275). Of all these titles, Rattray's "Every Girl Should Marry to Whom She Is Given in Marriage" (53-55) states the moral even before the narration begins. In each of these tales what is discouraged is the exercise of will by the woman. On the other hand, there is not a single tale in the entire corpus of twenty-six collections of tales examined for this paper which enjoins a male suitor to accept the choice of his elders without reservation. The concern of the Chief in Blisset's "Onyempa and the Seven

Children of Nyame” is that his son make a wise choice from the several maidens who compete to become his wife (15-19).

Both the affront at (male) authority and received practice as well as the young woman’s (rude) rejection of male suitors are two unacceptable forms of behavior that are punished in the women. There is no negative comment on the male who makes his own choice, despite the presence of the elders. Appiah’s “The Breadwinner” (*Why the Hyena* 32-33) depicts a scene in which male suitors compete over the hand of a woman; the winner is the one who tells the longest tale. In “It Is Good to Be Kind” (*The Pineapple Child* 100-05), a hunter is rewarded with the hand of a woman who had got herself into trouble for choosing her own husband. Sky-God promises to give his daughter Abena Nkroma in marriage to any man who can weed his nettle-infested farm without scratching himself. Indeed in Ayeh’s version of the tale, a cow is the prize to be won, while the Sky-God himself exchanges his prized sheep for a beautiful woman (Rattray 77). The placement of cows and sheep and a woman in the same class speaks to the feasible, interchangeable, equal values attached to them. Although it is possible to see that part of the emphasis falls on the resolve of the would-be suitor, it is worth remarking that the young woman’s consent in these tales in which she is a prize to be won is not an issue at all (Rattray, “Why It Is the Elders Say We Should Not Repeat Sleeping-Mat Confidences” 129-33). In Ayeh’s version it is clear that the family’s own interest is closely linked to the choice made for the bride. Oforiwa’s brother is concerned that she accept the “good” choice made for her so that when this brother is in need, her husband can bail him out. The woman is thus expected to be selected, and her duty is to consent. The woman who behaves contrary to this convention suffers sorely, and the penalty ranges from deep regret through life-threatening situations to the transformation from a woman into a plant.

However, the version of the choosy bride that exists in Gyasi-Appiah’s collection is the only one in which a young woman chooses her mate and is poised on what looks like a happy relationship. In this story the narrator provides a reason why the young bride is so choosy: she wants to subject the suitors to tests in order to find out which of them is patient and sensitive to others. She chooses the man who is kind to animals (“A Girl and How She Chose Her Husband,” Gyasi-Appiah 110-12). Nevertheless, the idea of the woman choosing a husband for herself is sometimes handled like an occurrence foreboding doom. When the Goddess in Dankwa-Smith’s “The Tragedy of Osikani” predicts that the rich man’s daughter will insist on choosing her own husband in the future, the father responds to this impending “catastrophe” by hiding his daughter away from society until he has been able to choose a husband for her (57-73). In Ayeh’s version of this tale the parents lock her up in a room, and the lion employs the bird to simulate her parents’ voice. The young girl is devoured by the beast (“Meregye wo so oo, Odehyee Ba” 34-36). A similar fate awaits the daughter of the King who is placed under constant surveillance. It is the Devil who snatches her away (Ayeh, “Nea Enti a Opapo atifi yi Hua” 42-44). The fact that these plans conclude negatively suggests that the fathers have overreacted in these particular circumstances, having kept their daughters for too long

away from their “proper” roles as potential wives. The tales imply that women must be “guided,” not kept away from future grooms.

When the eight sisters set out to look for husbands in Rattray’s “Child-Kwasi-Gyinamoa” (221-27), their brother, Kwasi, goes with them, removing dangerous obstacles by his magic cow-tail switch. Eventually it is an old woman who matches the brides with the grooms. There is one story by Rattray (“How the Tail of Efuio, the Black-Colobus Monkey, Became White” 45-47) that tells of a woman who chose her own husband; this was after her mother had forgotten to choose for her. She comes back from the farm to find that all the grooms had been selected except this filthy-looking monkey. She picks him up, washes him, and makes him look presentable. They would have lived happily ever after but for the jealousy of others. It is usually the men who set out to look for prospective brides. Another variation of men who go out to select mates occurs in “How the Leopard’s Body Became Spotted” (Rattray 21-27) and Dankwa-Smith’s “Ananse Goes Wife-Hunting” (107-15). These stories serve to support the observation that the man plays the active role of choosing, while the woman fits the passive mode of being selected.

The norms that govern conjugality are closely linked to the selection of a mate. In Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence’s “The Pink Sweets,” for example, no one wanted to marry Adwoa because she had a bad temper. Her temper was such that even her own mother dreamt of an easier life without her daughter. When Kofi Fosu finally married Adwoa, their happiness is short-lived because her temper makes her husband very unhappy. As a solution a medicine man is consulted, who gives her a bottle of pink sweets to suck on any time she becomes angry or wants to express disagreement. The sweets have the power to block her temper and stifle her words. Adwoa takes the sweets for the rest of her married life and she lives happily ever after with Kofi Fosu (53-55). What is described as Adwoa’s “temper” turns out to be an innate desire to verbalize her thoughts, a natural propensity, often discouraged in the woman. It would appear as if a woman must imprison her thoughts if she would be happy in marriage. When Ananse comes home from a misadventure and vents his anger on his wife, “she saw he was angry [and] left him alone” (Toprah 13). In Manu’s “How the Mason Wasp Developed a Thin Stomach,” Ananse informs his wife of his plan to have sworn enemies weed his farm at the same time. She advises him against it, and Ananse replies: “I know what I am about, so you keep quiet” (17). In “How the ‘Cane’ Came into the World,” Ananse sends his wife to beg for food from their neighbor. When she tells him that their neighbor has a larger family than theirs, Ananse retorts:

“It is not for you to talk back,” said Ananse angrily. “You should obey my instructions. Go at once without wasting any more time.”
So Aso went, as she had been ordered. (Manu 36)

This does not imply that women must be passive without qualification. For when Kweku Ananse takes his wife Aso back to Onyankopong because she eats too much of his food and he finds her to be generally bothersome, Onyankopong responds by giving him a woman who has no mouth. This

woman, who never talks and who always listens to instructions and carries them out, turns out to be even more troublesome than the one with a mouth. Ananse has occasion to plead to have Aso back and learn to respect his wife (Dankwa-Smith "Ananse's Mouthless Wife," 80-84).

Polygamy is not very common in the Akan folktale, but the fact that the Sky-God himself has several wives (Rattray 77-81) would give divine legitimacy to this institution, often linked with the high economic status of the groom. In Dankwa-Smith's "Ananse Goes Wife Hunting," for example, when Ananse informs his friends of his intention to marry a second woman, his friends ask him why he does not wait till he has grown richer. Later in the story his new wife leaves him for another man because Ananse had lied about his true economic status (107-15).

Men and women are shown to be ultimately unhappy in the polygamous marriage, a fertile arena for discord in the family. There are examples of women who fight in a polygamous home, or who harm each other's children, in Rattray's "How It Came About that Hunters Are Poor" (81-89) and Gyasi-Appiah's "The Story of Ananse and His Two Wives" (129-31). In "How It Came about that Co-Wives Do Not Use the Same Hearth-Stones," a jealous wife supervises the death of her co-wife's child (Rattray 187-91). In *Ananse Akuamo* 2, a rival wilfully ignores the cries of her co-wife's child. The baby turns into a piece of fish that becomes the main ingredient in the food she prepares for the child's mother (6-8). Husband and wives are uniformly unhappy about the turn of events. However, the overall import of these tales is not to suggest a change in this marriage arrangement, but to show the women how they can cope, while men are advised to learn not to discriminate among the several women they are free to marry.

In Dankwa-Smith's "How Ananse Outwitted Kokroko," Ananse promises one of his daughters in marriage to King Kokroko. The daughter, Obeyeyie, which literally translates as "all will be well," is the pawn by which the father becomes rich. He is then obliged to make good his promise of marriage, even though the young woman dislikes the idea and is eventually miserable in marriage. The husband discriminates in his affection, thereby encouraging discord among the women, especially against Obeyeyie. Ananse shows his daughter various methods of endurance. Rattray's title to a similar tale, "No Man Should Say, 'This Is the Wife Whom I Love Best'" (175-77) states this admonishment against discrimination toward wives most clearly. In Dankwa-Smith's tale the wives connive and succeed in discrediting one wife in the eyes of their husband, while her father, as in the previous example, finds various ways of encouraging his daughter to survive the agony. She triumphs over obstacles in her marital home by being resourceful, witty, even turning a piece of arid land into a lush farmland and becoming an excellent cook. In Rattray's tale the favorite wife is the one who fails to rise to the occasion and honor her husband's memory.

There is only one story I have found for this study in which a woman has several husbands. The marriage breaks down because she is unable to cope with the demands of several men (Rattray 71-77).

Parenthood

As in the area of marriage, the emphasis on parenting is explicated largely as a female's role, with the defining criterion being the biological reproduction of offspring. There are times when the definition of parenthood is broadened to include parenting an adopted child. However, as we see in "The Adventures of Bakor" by Dankwa-Smith, the woman who protects "an abandoned child" has her own whom she carries on her back (7-18).

Women are constantly shown in their reproductive roles. They may be pregnant or bearing children or in the company of children (Rattray, "How the Babadua Reed Got the Joints [on Its Stalk]" 27-31; "How Okoto the Crab, Got a Shell, and Abrewa the Old Woman, Got White Hair" 31-35; "How the Neck of Anene, the Crow Became White and His Back Became Black" 35-37) or they are shown to be plagued by infant mortality as in "How It Came about That We Shall Always See Okra, the Cat, Lying on a Velvet Cushion, While 'Kraman the Dog Will Sleep among the Ashes on the Kitchen Fire" 111-19) or are unfulfilled because they have no children of their own. A woman plans to divorce her husband because she sees no sign of pregnancy after several years of marriage (Gyasi-Appiah "The Story of the Motherless Child," 7-8). The men are not spared this pressure to have children either, although we do not see any man who measures his happiness solely on his ability to produce offspring. Opanyin Kwaw has no children of his own in Blisset's "No Wings to Fly to Heaven" (53-57), but he derives ample satisfaction from spending time with children from his neighborhood. In "How Kwaku Ananse (the Spider) Got Aso in Marriage," Aso and her husband Kwasi-the-Jealous-One seem to have adjusted to life without children of their own, although that was a reason they moved away from society. However, even the Sky-God encourages the young men to impregnate Aso because her husband is unable to fulfill the expectation after several years of marriage. It takes Kwaku Ananse who adopts the name "Rise-up-and-make-love-to-Aso" to accomplish the feat. He marries Aso and Akwasi-the-Jealous-One is rejected (Rattray 133-37). Women must get married and have children, the tales suggest.

In Appiah's eponymous story, "The Pineapple Child, or How Men Became Fools," Ama Nyankumasoma is very unhappy because she has no children (*The Pineapple Child* 40-43). In another tale in the same collection, "Chasing a Sunbird," "a young woman [is] wandering on her own in the forest, looking for medicinal herbs. She had no child and in her sorrow had bound a wooden spoon to her back and had fastened beads round it as if it were indeed a baby" (108). The sense of isolation of the childless woman is strong. The woman in "Woka wo Asem na Anntse A . . ." consults the palm tree and is prepared to do whatever the tree demands, in return for a child (*Anansesem Ye Asisie* 16-18). The theme of barrenness is very common in African literature, especially those imaginative writing produced by women (Aidoo, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*; Nwapa, *Efuru* and *Idu*; Okoye, among others). The prevalence of this subject would point to a child-oriented society and consequently an overriding, limited definition of successful womanhood. In Dankwa-Smith's "Naughty Kweku" however, the couple Yaa

Donkor and Agya Kweku had no children and they both travel and seek the help of medicine men in a desperate effort to end their unhappiness. The cooperation between husband and wife in this tale is worth noting; no special blame is placed on the woman in a tale written by a woman (46-47). In the majority of cases it is the woman who seeks a cure for infertility. In "How It Came about that Some People Are Good-Looking and Others Are Not Good-Looking" by Rattray, a woman consults the palm tree about child-bearing (49-51), while the Queen in "How It Came About that the Tail of the Oka Fish Is Red, and the Gills of the 'Kobo Fish Are Striped'" believes that a god can help her to have a child (Rattray 99-101). In Appiah's "The Pineapple Child, or How Men Became Fools," it is another, older woman who ends Ama's depression by providing a pineapple that turns into a beautiful baby girl. The solidarity between different generations of women is emphasized by this relationship; the objective is not antagonism toward the opposite sex but collaboration and solidarity in the progressive senses. However, Ama fails to follow the directives of the older woman that the baby be kept in the shade at all times. She loses her child as a result of her carelessness. It takes the story of a woman's failed effort at parenting to explain how some human beings became fools.

Some of the desired qualities in a mother are suggested in Appiah's "How the Foolish Son Defeated Death," a variation of which exists in Dankwa-Smith's "Only the Fool Could Help" (19-25) and Rattray's "In a Tribe There Is No Person Wholly Devoid of Sense" (97-99). It is a story that encourages tolerance, warmth, and empathy, and that discourages discrimination among children by the mother. In Appiah's version of this tale, a mother of three sons, Nyankumase, shuns the dim-witted child in favor of the two more intelligent and economically successful sons. When Death summons the woman, the two competent sons are unable to save her. In her desperation she looks for and finds Akyene, the abandoned son who challenges Death to wipe off his footsteps on his patch of beach sand where he was playing before Death can take his mother away. The mother's life is spared because Death is unable to comply with this order. The child who was originally dismissed as a fool is the only one who, paradoxically, through this display of intelligence, comes to the rescue. Similarly the mother must exhibit abundant love and sympathy and learn to be kind to the stepchild. The woman who underfeeds her stepchild and gives her a strainer to fetch water in Ayeh's "Se Eeye a Bemu baa Wiase" is shown to have thus prepared a more difficult life for her own daughter (18-19). The stepfather in Ayeh's "Wope se egu wo Yonko so a, Ego wo So" who plans to kill his stepchild in order to keep the wealth he created with the child's mother turns into a crocodile (10-11). The fate of the child whose biological mother pampers her is not any better. When she is plagued along with her half-sister by a terrible skin rash, the mother scrubs the stepchild's rashes with harsh medication while her own child is spared the ordeal. The biological child dies from infection, while the stepchild's skin becomes smooth (Gyasi-Appiah "The Story of the Motherless Child," 7-8). In another story from the same collection a man carried his joy over the birth of a daughter so far as to cause intense jealousy in the four older sons. The sons plan to

kill their only sister, and the revelation causes the break-down of the family ("The Story of the Man and His Daughter" 132-36).

The relationship between father and children is not so pronounced in the Akan folktale, although there are several instances where we see Ananse on the farm with his children, or sending them on errands. Gender roles in child-rearing are not always rigidly defined. When New Mother Rat cannot hunt for herself, Father Rat willingly takes up the responsibility of providing food for the family, even at the risk of his life. He falls into the trap of Tiger in the effort (Blisset, "Rat and Tiger," 58-61). The story of "Ama Sika," also by Blisset, tells of a man who loses his wife and is left with a small baby. The narrative shows this man to be an adept male single parent. His daughter's arm is caught in his trap by sheer accident, and we see him nurse her back to health (23-30). These are unusual circumstances that would show that although women are the ones expected to take care of children, men must and do step in when necessary. Other single male parents operate without incident, although in these stories we are not furnished with information about the mother. These fathers and sons exist as a matter of course (Ayeh "Se eyece a Mmofra pe Mmoa Koma," 73-76); Rattray "How It Came about that We Do Not Leave a child in an Empty House," 7-10).

While children are shown to be desirable, the folktale shows that too many of them can deprive a mother of the joys of motherhood. The woman with too many children is embittered by the excessive demands of motherhood. In "How Abosom, the Lesser-Gods, Came into the world" by Rattray, the children are so many that the mother never has enough to eat. As a result, she tries various ways of getting rid of them. There is no mention of a father in this tale of a woman who obviously needs help (191-97).

Work

The effort to sustain the self and the family through various activities offers yet another forum through which gender roles can be perceived. Generally speaking, both men and women are seen at work in the Akan folktale (Dankyi 26, 28; Manu 29; Ayeh 79). Some differences would occur in the type of work they do and the status associated with those roles.

Women's roles seem relatively confined to the home, especially in sweeping (Ayeh, "Wunni Biribi de ma w'ase a, Wommo no Koron" 96-99; *Fa Bi Ye Serew* 2: 19-24; "Kweku Ananse a Oyi Sema," *Fa Bi Ye Serew* 3: 21-24); taking care of the family and guests (Manu, "How the 'Cane' Came into the World" 35-43); preparing food and washing clothes (Rattray "How the Babdua Reed Got the Joints (on Its Stalk)," 27-31; "We Do Not Leave an Elephant Behind, to Go and Throw a Stone at Aserewa, the Wren" 269-71; Dankyi, *Ananse Searches*, "The Bean Stew" 19-25); or fetching water (Ayeh "Nea enti a Nnipa nhu Owu," 49-51; Rattray "On Any Path, Where You See that Osebo, the Leopard, Has Scratched, There Adanko, the Hare, Has [Already] Passed," 227-31). However, women are not uniformly limited to the domestic scene. Some women are depicted outside of their homes, sometimes alone on their farms. Aso was weeding and tending food crops when the message came that her husband Ananse was dying (Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence 32). In Blisset's "Adventures of Bakor," the woman who

eventually adopts the abandoned child was on her way to her farm, carrying her baby on her back and on her head, a wooden tray with hoes and cutlasses in it. And in the story of "The Pineapple Child, or How Men Became Fools" by Appiah, a woman goes into the forest in search of medicinal herbs. These stories suggest that the woman's sources and range of knowledge go beyond the realm of culinary items and domestic duties.

Men, however, and not women, usually appear in the skilled professions of blacksmiths (*Fa Bi Ye Serew* 2: "Akoratwe" 6-8), doctors of herbs (Rattray "How It Came about that One Person Does Not Reveal the Origin from Which Another Person Sprang," 125-29), medicine men (Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence "The Pink Sweets," 53-55; Rattray "You Are as Wonderful as Ananse the Spider," 265-67; Ayeh "Wo per se egu wo Yohnko so a egu wo So." 10-11; "Nea Enti a Ananse tare Dampire Ani," 79-82; "Wunni Biribi de ma w'ase a, Wommo no koron," 96-99); traders (Rattray "How Some One Got a Wife [and also Saved] His Life by Means of Interpreting Symbols," 103-05), diviners (*Fa Bi Ye Serew* 3: "Akokowaba Tsikenenkene," 3-11), priests of shrines (Ayeh "Senea Ananse daadaa Obosomfoo bi gye ne Guan kodii," 16-17), peddlers (Dankwa-Smith "The Tiger Who Was Fooled Twice," 74-79), money lenders (Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence "The Twenty Gold Coins," 11-13; Rattray "Ananse, the Spider, Said He Was Going in Search of a Fool, While All the Time He Himself Was a Fool," 253-57), carvers (*Fa Bi Ye Serew* 3: "Kweku Ananse a Oyi Sem," 21-24; Ayeh "Nea Enti a Opete sisi Sumina So," 71-73; Dankyi *Ananse Searches*: "Nyankonsem Becomes Ananse Stories," 1-9), or in the construction industry (Rattray "How It Came about that the Vulture Always Sits among Filth," 13-15; "How Kwatima, the Ram, Came to Get the Name of Odwanini," 398-42; "Why Ananse, the Spider, Runs When He Is on the Surface of Water," 139-41).

The story in which women go fishing ends in tragedy (Dankyi *Ananse Searches*: "How the Crow Got a White Collar," 38-44; Rattray "How the Neck of Anene the Crow Became White and His Back Became Black," 35-37). Whereas both men and women sing (Gyasi-Appiah "Why the Pigeon's Tail Is Red," 45-47), men are the ones who play the musical instruments of the guitar, the drum, and the flute (*Anansesem Ye Asisie* "Mibedzidzi M'Anomu Nde," 9-12; Gyasi-Appiah "The Story of the Vulture and the Guinea Fowl," 51-54, and "Why the Pigeon's Tail Is Red," 45-47). Even though there is a woman potter in Appiah's "How Wisdom Was Spread throughout the World," that skill, as we saw in the tale of the woman who can interpret symbols, is placed at the service of her husband. When Ananse decides to fly, in an episode that recalls Icarus and Daedalus, Aso helps with the arrangement of feathers on her husband's body. She is the one who makes the pot into which Ananse places all his wisdom. This is a tale that features Aso more prominently than in the others; here we see her artistry at work as she collects clay and carefully molds it into a beautiful pot.

Examples of males as hunters abound in the Akan folktale, although one of Dankyi's stories shows women hunting for snails, among the most harmless of all animals. A hunter of snails needs no special tools, skills, tactics, antics, or resolve to avoid danger of the hunted animal as would the hunter of a deer or a leopard. A major objective of the hunt is to provide

sustenance for the family. However, as hunters, neither the men nor the women—even when hunting merely for snails—would be spared the dangers of falling into a pit or risking a snake bite. The difference would lie in the object of the hunt. Snails, deer, and leopards may provide both food and medicine, but the hunter who comes home with a leopard will be greeted by the whole community for his resolve and prowess; his name could pass through song into the history of the community. A woman who comes home with a basketful of snails would have proved some physical energy, but not enough to merit chronicling.

Self-Worth

The standards by which men and women gauge their self-esteem is one of the areas of concern for the Akan folktale. Conformity to specific cultural ways of seeing and behavior is expected from both men and women, and their worth is measured accordingly. Within the context of the marriage the wife sees her self-worth as directly linked to that of her husband. In Dankyi's "The Yam Porridge," Ananse's wife boasts to other women about the good manners of her husband, thus enhancing her own prestige in the eyes of her peers (1-4). In this sense the desire of women characters to bolster the status of their husbands can be appreciated, since a diminution of the man's station would directly violate the woman's social standing. "Why the Dog Hates the Cat" narrates the events surrounding the funeral of Dog's mother-in-law. When Dog receives the sad news, he asks his good friend Cat for advice on the proper way to conduct himself at the funeral. Cat uses the occasion to humiliate Dog, of whom he has grown to be jealous. He therefore teaches him a song with the wrong lyrics for a funeral. When Dog begins his "dirge," his wife, embarrassed and angry, asks Cat to "make his friend shut up or there would be trouble" (66). In this tale it is Dog's wife who initiates the divorce proceedings with the full support of the community, because she "cannot stand being married to such a beast and a fool" (66). Dog loses his wife because he had irreparably damaged his esteem in the eyes of the community. In Toprah's "Ananse and the Pot of Wisdom," Ananse's wife divorces him for a reason similar to that of Dog's wife in the previous story (Dankyi, *Ananse* 1-2).

While the male is seen as a major provider in the world of the tale, and a man's worth is measured by his ability to provide sustenance for his family, the woman is not a complete dependent. Whenever there is famine, as happens too often in the tale, the man goes along with the woman in search of food (Ratray "There Is Nothing Anywhere [that We Fear]," 267-69). It must be admitted that these are unusual circumstances. In conformity with the expected role of the male, Aso succeeds in making her husband go out to find sustenance for the family. She manages the task by playing on his ego: "[Y]ou claim to have all the wisdom in the world and yet you cannot do a simple thing like finding us a meal. You have lost your touch or else you are too lazy to work. Go out and find food or we shall know you have lost your wisdom" (Appiah, *Tales* 139). Aso's attitude is similar to that of Lion's wife who chides her husband, driving him out in search of food: "[Y]ou great good-for-nothing . . . you pride yourself in being King of Beasts, in being

strong and powerful. What good is your strength and your power if you cannot even bring home a meal for your family. Off with you now and don't come back home until you have found something" (Appiah, *Tales* 96). The women exert control over their husbands by their use of the imperative, in telling them to do what is expected of them in the first place. In one of the few instances in which Aso speaks, she expresses disagreement over her husband's methods of planting cassava, although she has to fall on the authority of an older woman. When Leopard ill advises Ananse to prune his cassava of their leaves, "Ananse's wife warned him that her grandmother said she never saw or heard of cassava being pruned in all the hundred and three years she lived" (Blisset 63).

In some of the tales women are generally portrayed as people who are incapable of keeping secrets and of being responsible for the spread of calamities in the world. By implication they are depicted as people who cannot be trusted. In "It Is Good to Be Kind," a hunter rescues animals caught in a pit and the animals promise to show their gratitude. The mouse brings the hunter a bag of gold, which improves his economic standing considerably. However, unknown to the hunter, the mouse had stolen the gold from the King's treasury. After persistent questioning from his wife about the source of their wealth, the hunter tells her about the gifts from the mouse. The wife, "a stupid woman, and a gossip who likes to boast" (Appiah, *Tales* 102), reveals the secret of their wealth to another in the village. The hunter's sudden wealth is linked to the missing gold from the palace. He is arrested, charged with theft, and ordered to be executed. The ingenuity of the mouse saves him from imminent death. In another story, a woman who finally has a baby leaves it in the care of her house-help who refuses to follow the instructions of the God that the baby be kept in the shade at all times (Rattray, "How the Babdua Reed Got the Joints [on Its Stalk]" 27-31). A young girl who knows that she will die if she climbs a palm tree, allows her lover or playmate to encourage her to break the taboo. They both turn into oil as a result (Rattray, "How It Came about That Some People Are Good-Looking, and Others Are Not Good-Looking" 49-51; *Anansesem. Ye Asisie* 1: "Woka wo asem na Anntse a . . ." 16-18). Ayeh tells a story in which Ananse exchanges his life for a piece of yam from Death during famine. He tells Death he can come for him as soon as he has finished eating the food. Ananse plans never to finish off the last slice. His wife, Yaa, unwittingly eats the wilted remaining piece and Ananse must get ready for Death (65-67). In another story by Gyasi-Appiah, Cock and Hen agree not to disclose their discovery of gold dust to their master because "when he became rich, he would be so happy that he would order the two fowls to be killed for a delicious meal in order to celebrate with his family the discovery of such a fortune" (42-43). However, at the first instance of disagreement between Cock and Hen, the latter quickly leaks the secret. Both birds played gustatory roles in the celebration.

Dankyi's "An Old Woman and the Eagle" corroborates the idea of women as people who cannot be trusted, especially to keep a promise. In her tale, an old, abandoned woman is raised from rags to riches by an eagle. In return for her favor, the eagle requests that her safety and that of her

children be guaranteed. It so happens that the old woman's grandchild, who is on the verge of death, can only be saved by medication prepared from the babies of the eagle. She bows to pressure, sacrifices the children of the eagle, and is consequently returned to her former state. The tale ends with the admonition "you must learn to keep a promise" (*Tortoise Flies* 32-37). In "How Treachery Came in to the World," the greed of two men invites treachery into the world. Men may have their share of the blame for catastrophe in the world, although the weight appears tilted against women. The self-esteem of women suffers another blow when a woman is shown to be responsible for the existence of horrible diseases in the world. This affliction descends on humanity because a sick woman bathes and keeps the dirty water in a bottle. When the bottle breaks, it releases on mankind such diseases as syphilis, leprosy, small pox, fits, and madness (Rattray 77-81).

Women in the Akan tale may be saved by male characters in times of difficulty, but they do not display excessive emotional weaknesses. However, the fact that we see women and sometimes children (Toprah 19), but never men, wail at funerals underlines a specific cultural norm, that dirges may be sung only by women (Nketia 1-18). Dirges require high verbal and performance skills. Based on history and poetry and performed with careful, studied movements of the body, dirges are indispensable to the funeral rites for the deceased. They are always composed and sung to extol the life and ancestry of the deceased, to comfort the mourners, or to send messages through the dead to the ancestors whom the deceased is believed to be joining shortly. When the man with many wives dies in Rattray's "No Man Should Say, 'This Is the Wife Whom I Love Best,'" the widows are called to "come and weep" (175-77). The depth of their affection for their deceased husband is expected to be reflected in the composition of their dirges and manner of rendition. There is no tale in which a woman dies and a man is called to "come and weep."

Okonore Yaa is always the one who is regularly informed in various tales about the death of her mother and who perpetually wails in response to the awful news (Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence, "The Yam Porridge" 1-4; Appiah *Tales*, "How Kwaku Ananse Became Bald" 44-49; Dankwa-Smith, "Greedy Ananse" 26-34; Dankyi *Ananse Searches*, "The Bean Stew" 19-25; *Fa Bi Ye Serew* 2: "Kwaku Ananse yo maa ne tiri ho Pae" 22-24; Rattray, "How the Spider Got a Bald Head" 119-23). Yaa also weeps in Dankyi's "The Barbecued Pork" at the sight of the serious burns on her son. In this tale Ananse cultivates a huge farm with his son Ntikuma. At harvest season he quarrels with Ntikuma and sends him away from the farm. Ntikuma plans his revenge by plastering barbecued pork over his legs, and sends a message to his father that he has suffered burns. In one of the rare, genuine displays of emotion by Ananse, he weeps at the sight of his son (Ayeh 60-62). However, Ananse quickly overcomes his emotions and accepts a piece of his son's "flesh," which he enjoys tremendously. When he goes home and pours boiling water over his own legs in an effort to turn them into spicy meat, the audience has a good opportunity for comic relief, as Ananse howls over the pain. In other stories when Ananse receives news about the death of his

mother-in-law, he either assembles his friends to enter the funeral grounds with rehearsed dirges or hires the services of a mourning party, in order to raise his own status in the eyes of his in-laws (Dankyi *Ananse Searches*, "The Bean Stew" 19-25; Rattray, "How the Spider Got a Bald Head" 119-23). Therefore, when we see him weep in these contexts, we do not take him seriously, no matter how impressed his in-laws are (Rattray, "How It Came about that Ananse, the Spider, Went up on the Rafters" 249). When Hyena receives the bad news about the death of his mother, he weeps openly, although this early display of emotion makes his greed all the more abhorrent. He wakes up in the middle of the night to dig up the body for consumption (Rattray, "When Kokosakyi, the Vulture, Speaks in Allegories to Bonokyerefo, the Hyena, He Understands Him" 173-75).

Unrestrained display of grief is not encouraged, even in women, for among the Akans, grief must always be expressed within the formal structures of the dirge. A woman loses her husband and refuses to be consoled in Ayeah's "Seante ye Mmusu" (13-14). This woman rejects all attempts to pacify her. She even refuses to eat, despite the entreaties of the entire community. The king calls her bluff and offers to supervise personally her fast. She dies of starvation. The moral injunction against undisciplined grief is clear.

We do not see women as travelers or adventurers as we do the men. In the Ananse stories that form the bulk of Akan folktales, Aso, wife of Kweku Ananse, is not the adventurous one. In Rattray's "If You Are Going Anywhere, When Your Kinsman Says He Will Accompany You, Then Go along with Him" (155-57), the mother gives her three sons money to travel and trade with. It is possible to infer that the mother is merely exploiting her sons, although some of the benefit of travel and adventure that will accrue to the sons cannot be ruled out. When Turtle-Dove goes in search of her sister that she has not seen in three years, she is accompanied by her husband. She survives, while the adventurous one is murdered (Rattray, "How It Came about that Aturukuku, the Turtle-Dove, Went to the Bush and Let Akoto, the Hen, Come to the House" 199-201).

Women are not depicted as undertaking long journeys and exploits. Those who do often bring untold sorrows to themselves and their families. We have already noted the disasters awaiting those who choose their own husbands and go on journeys with them. The story of Abena is slightly different in the sense that she accepted her parents' choice of a spouse, but she turned out to be unhappy because she traveled far away with her husband and never visited her own home in ten years (Rattray, "They Say When You Go Elsewhere, Return Home Quickly" 123-25). The adventurous girl who does not submit to her mother's authority and goes in search of "I will see" suffers many misfortunes, including physical abuse and starvation (Rattray, "How Okoto, the Crab, Got a Shell, and Aberewa, the Old Woman, Got White Hair" 31-35; "Wait There and You Will See" 151-53); and the girl who insists on going back to the beach to find her lost shell is drowned (Gyasi-Appiah 126-28). An exception to this rule occurs in Gyasi-Appiah's "The Woman and the Elephant," in which a woman goes into the forest to find her daughter, whom an elephant had swallowed. The elephant

swallows the mother as well. The older woman works her way out of the animal's huge frame and the body of the elephant provides meat for the whole community for a long time (159-60).

Authority

The right to control, make decisions, or enforce obedience would offer yet another way in which gender roles can be determined in the Akan folk-tale. The characters whose political and social status would legitimize their commands are the kings, heads of the village who are males, as well as adult males and, sometimes, mothers. In this list, women feature in very limited ways, while children would appear to have no authority at all. The structure for the exercise of authority places women at the bottom and men at the top, both in terms of the space over which their influence may be felt as well as in terms of how successful they are in imposing their will over their subjects. The women's power is displayed in the home, more specifically in their relationship with their daughters. The men control their families (women and children), while the authority of the heads of the communities or kings is all-embracing.

Women exert control over children, especially the girls. In this sense women are used to hone girls into the kind of product desirable in a woman in the tale. The methodology rests largely on playing on the fears of the young child. The tales discussed here catalogue the disasters awaiting the "stubborn" girl. Araba Munnsurohwee, as her name states, fears nothing and nobody, making it difficult for her mother to play the role expected of her. The strange child Araba bears, who does everything in excess, causes the whole village to emigrate. The child's behavior is directly linked with the mother's own disposition (*Fa Bi Ye Serew* 3: 1-11). Appiah's "Abena Sakyi and the Sasabonsam" is a variation of the tale about the young woman with a strong will. In this tale, Abena is an only child, a situation that would explain why her mother is overprotective of her. She insists on attending a funeral in the village, much against her mother's wishes. The fact that she is able to defy her mother is significant in allowing for an examination of the nature of her mother's authority. The daughter does not have faith in her mother's power to uphold her authority. As a result, the mother cannot exact obedience from her daughter in a way that would compare to how fathers bend the will of the whole family to theirs, and how the King commands adherence to rules from the whole community. On the way, Abena meets the dreaded forest devil, Sasabonsam, who never spares his victims. She pleads for her life, and Sasabonsam accompanies her to the outskirts of the village and will release her only if she shows evidence of parental control. Peeved by her daughter's disobedience, Abena's mother refuses to let her in and Abena is devoured by the devil.

The reaction of the wider community is important in suggesting the limits of parental control and in providing a picture of women with authority. The wider community does not approve of the mother's refusal to open the door for her daughter, believing that she had allowed her emotions to carry her too far. She is forbidden to mourn her and is made to take responsibility for her death. A similar impression is created in "How the

Neck of Anene the Crow Became White and His Back Became Black” by Rattray (31-34), in “Woka wo asem na Anntse a . . .” in *Fa Bi Ye Serew* 2 (16-18), and in Ayeh’s “Se Eyee a Kwaakwaadabi Kon mu Yee Fitaa na ne Ho nso yee Tuntum” (8-9). In Rattray’s tale, an old woman, in an attempt to root out dishonesty in her grandchildren, oversteps her bounds when she inadvertently makes the river carry away her favorite grandchild. The crow brings back the child and the old woman regrets having resorted to such cruel methods. In the second story, the palm tree answers the wish of a couple to have a child. This child must never climb the palm tree. When she disobeys and the tree starts to choke her, her parents come over and advise the tree to squeeze her even harder. Her playmate comes to the rescue too late and they are both turned into palm oil. In Gyasi-Appiah’s “Why the Pigeon’s Tail Is Red” (45-47), a male child defies his mother’s advice, goes back to the farm to retrieve a flute, and loses his life. In “The Story of Ananse’s Children and the Witch,” the young men who shun their mother’s advice come close to being swallowed by a python (115-18). These five stories generally suggest that women be not given too much power since they neither appear to distinguish between correcting and destroying, nor demonstrate the capacity to enforce authority. Likewise, we do not see many instances of open challenge to authority in the tale, except in the case of the daughter and mother, thereby underscoring that exercise of control as the weakest in the structure.

The man is more successful than the woman in enforcing obedience in the home. The man’s authority over the wife and children is, most of the time, not questioned—not even when it does not make sense. When a man orders his wives and children to roast corn meant for planting, they obey the foolish directions without any objections (Ayeh, “Ananse ne Ntikuma bi asem Bi” 60-62). Ananse decides to prevent his wife and children from harvesting the crops they had all planted. He feigns death, but not before he has given the most incredible guidelines about his funeral arrangements, which include instant burial, along with pots and pans, in a shallow grave on the farm. The narrator says that “nobody was bold enough to ask a question so they agreed to go by his instructions” (Manu 29). The men are proved wrong in these tales, and that makes a subtle criticism about unquestioned authority. Women’s misuse of power, as seen earlier, is openly challenged.

By the time we get to the King and head of the community, we see that the social realm for the display of power has broadened considerably to cover all men, women, and children. Two broad contrasting images of the King arise: that of the benevolent King and that of the treacherous one. There is the King who is hospitable, respectable, hardworking, and popular among his people, as in “It Is Good to Be Kind” by Appiah (*The Pineapple Child* 100-05), Ayeh’s “Akukonfi ne Ananse” (76-79), Gyasi-Appiah’s “He Does Not Prosper Who Prevents Others from Prospering” (28-30), and Manu’s “How the Mason Wasp Developed a Thin Stomach” (14-21). “Why the Crow Is Partly Black” tells of a King who organizes a competition among his subjects to determine their levels of intelligence and bravery or to find out who can rid society of pests (Manu 1-7; Okae, *Tell a Tale* 7-10 and

Why So Stories, Ayeɛh 14-16). In Manu's tale, for example, we are informed that when the King threw the challenge, "all the men went about trying to get [the items]." There is no reference to a woman competitor. The language in which Ayeɛh's tales are told, Akuapem Twi, does not specify the gender of the pronoun, so we cannot be certain. Other kings settle cases in Rattray's "Why the Elders Say We Should Not Repeat Sleeping-Mat Confidences" (129-33); Toprah's "Ananse and the Pot of Wisdom" (1-2), Ayeɛh's "Nea Enti a Ananse tare Dampare Ani" (79-82); Gyasi-Appiah's "The Story of the Elephant and Its Tail" (18-20), "The Story of Ananse and the Vulture" (34-37), and "The Story of Kweku Ananse and the Trap" (58-61), "The Tortoise and the Lizard" (145-47). There is a King who makes the necessary sacrifices to pacify the spirits and restore balance to his society (Rattray, "How It Came about that Atukuru, the Turtle-Dove, Went to the Bush and Let Akoko, the Hen, Come to the House" 199-201), as well as the one who organizes a search party to find missing persons (Manu 11-13), or who wants to find the one who is upsetting normalcy in the community (*Ananse Akuamoa* 2: 3-11), or who plans towards the economic progress of the community (Gyasi-Appiah, "The Result of Procrastination" 14-15). When Okonore Yaa discovers that someone is stealing food from her farm, she appeals to the King. He succeeds in finding the thief, who happens to be her own husband, believed to have died a few weeks prior to the discovery. When Ananse sells rotten fish traps at the market, the King orders that he be flogged for his deception. The heads of the villages are seen in close contact with their people, safeguarding property or restoring harmony (Rattray 103-05).

Some of the rulers, however, emerge as autocratic, with little regard for the lives of their subjects. In "The Bitter Pill," which reads very much like the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes," the "powerful and proud King" (Appiah, *Why the Hyena* 84), with surprising ease, orders the execution of ten of his councilors over a trifle. The King who demands the execution of eleven men in Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence's "The Elephant's Discovery" resorts to this harsh measure because the hasty advice of these elders has led to the death of one man. There are several instances where the councilors of a King are afraid to express honest view (Dankyi and Lloyd-Lawrence 16-20). In "The Left Handed King," also by Appiah, the elders cannot tell the King that he should be more critical of unknown practices. Then there is the story of the ruler who collaborated with a subject to deprive another of his property in "How Treachery Came in to the World" (Appiah, *The Pineapple Child* 97-99).

The comparative role of the female, the Queen, appears in only four tales among the entire collection examined for this paper. In Gyasi-Appiah's "The Story of the Wicked Queen," she alienates all the wise (male) elders of her council, while she wastes the time and talents of the youth under her care by asking them to accomplish impossible and fruitless tasks like making a rope out of clay. It takes an old man to point out her folly and to suggest ways of restoring order, which rests on according the male elders an effective voice in the governance of the community. In Appiah's "The Bread Winner" (*Why the Hyena*), she helps a widow find a

suitable husband for her only child, while in Rattray's stories, the Queen seeks a cure for sterility ("How It Came about that the Tail of Oka Fish Is Red, and the Gills of the Kobo Fish Are Striped" 99-101) or is troubled because her daughter refuses to marry the men who propose to her ("How It Came about that the Parrot's Tail Became Red" 171-73). Curiously, the "power" of the Akan Queen, which is often quoted to show how liberated Akan women are, does not feature at all in the Akan folktale. The woman with authority is invariably shown to be unnatural. The woman who commands a hamlet to turn into a populated town turns out to be a ghost. Although a positive use of power in the context, it is nevertheless depicted as suspicious and coming from sources outside the woman's own abilities (Rattray, "How It Came about that the Parrot's Tail Became Red" 171-73).

What is most striking in the portrayal of women in these tales is the absence of sexist language. Gender roles are seen to be complementary rather than conflicting. Even in those tales written from the male perspective, there are no condescending references to a "woman's job," nor are there excessive values attached to the roles we see generally played by men in the folktale. Actually, there is hardly any role that is rigidly defined along the lines of gender. There is no image of woman on a pedestal, living an artificially elevated life in a rarefied fantasy world. Likewise, we have no image of woman grounded in idyllic retirement, or of woman so bored, stifled, and unfulfilled that she resorts to suicide to escape from a suffocating life. Furthermore, the Akan folktale does not depict a woman who is frail and fainting, excessively emotional, never able to fend for herself, or making a full-time occupation out of sitting and waiting to be swept off her feet by a man. The tale neither dwells on nor supports the debilitating form of romantic love in which the woman is no more than the object of the man's desire, a passive receptacle of affection. On the other hand, the tale shows examples of women who yearn for and create the chances to make important decisions and choices for life and who need the support of society in taking such important steps. Women in the Akan tale are seen to possess the capacity to express themselves in more creative ways than are available to them. The central lesson of the tales seems to be that these women are quite capable in many more ways than are allowed them for self-expression. The criticism of society implicit in this view is part of the folktale's artistic function.

Indeed the supple nature of the tale allows for such an expansion of both form and content to accommodate a desired sense of social self-correction. The dynamic disposition of the tale shows in how the same tale can be told and retold, or be written in numerous versions, to make revelations not only about society, but also about the teller, the audience, the culture, and the purpose of the narration. The malleable form of the tale creates the space and the opportunity for introducing new elements in a known tale or for telling an entirely new tale to respond to forming demands. These changes are also occasioned by the motives of both the teller and the audience as well as by the interaction between both. The form of the tale

has been seen to be nonsexist. The folktale can create more positive and varied images to project a sense of freedom and justice for all.

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