

Shifting shapes and unknown spirits at play on the borders of the human imagination: a critical reading of *the serpent-woman*

Reading *the serpent woman*

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this study is to determine if the main character is a shapeshifter and, if so, how does the tale contribute to shapeshifting lore.

Design/methodology/approach – The focus of the study is confined to a version of the tale that appears in Jane Yolen's *Folktales From Around the World* (1986) and on summaries of other versions of shapeshifting tales when needed. Support for the findings is provided by an examination of the observations and rhetorical techniques employed by what appears to be an unreliable narrator and selected knowledge and practices from a variety of academic disciplines.

Findings – The research findings neither confirm nor deny that the main character is or is not a shapeshifter.

Research limitations/implications – Instead, the critical reading confirms the traditional characterization of folktales as coming from diverse folk roots and disappearing or changing as they circulate through geographical space and narrative time.

Practical implications – It also implies that the tale has outgrown its practical and social folk roots and now extends far beyond that of traditional shapeshifting or literary folktales.

Social implications – By bringing to light the racial and gender fears, ignorance and emotional and physical violence that lurk just below the surface of the society from which serpent-woman emerges, the study creates a haunting vision of the embedded biases that lurk just below the surface of many societies.

Originality/value – To this author's knowledge, this is the first study of this tale to appear in publication. The findings need further investigation.

Keywords Woman, Córdoba, Jinn, Serpent, Shapeshifting, Twelfth-century

Paper type Conceptual paper

She is beautiful, but strange . . . She is dark . . . She comes from far away.

The Serpent-Woman

Imagine a world in which animals, vegetables and minerals acquire otherworldly characteristics, where gods take on the shape of human warriors, where ghosts of loved ones acquire corporeal form and where familiar shapes shift or change with or without the permission of their owners. Imagine a moment when a shapeshifter slips into the human world and begins to move among its inhabitants. How did he, she or it find its way to this place? What does it do when it arrives? Does it have a purpose? Where will it go once it fulfills



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that purpose? How does the human world react to its presence? Does the shapeshifter's essence change during its stay? Do the essences of the humans it encounters change or shift in response to its presence or absence?

Shapeshifting is one of the most intriguing concepts to emerge from studies of folklore and mythology. In its simplest form, it can be understood as a combination of two words: shape as a form and/or physical structure or design; shifting as being unstable or changing; and shapeshifting as a physical change that affects inner changes in a shapeshifting being. Very few shapeshifting tales ask if shapeshifters exist. And although human rather than nonhuman transformation would seem to be impossible, it is actually a well-recognized but little understood phenomenon that has existed since humans first began drawing shapes that captured the spiritual essence of animals on the walls of caves.

Both ancient and modern mythologies testify to the acceptance and diversity of shapeshifters. The Greek Proteus, the God of rivers and oceans, for example, takes on different forms, both animate and inanimate, when trying to avoid a prophetic request. The Indian demon rakshasa willingly changes into several unpredictable shapes while pursuing a victim of choice, and the vampires of Eastern Europe, who first appear as human corpses, take on bat forms before flying to feast on their prey. Perhaps one of the most intriguing characteristics of shapeshifters is that it is sometimes difficult to sense their intent. Many can be good, evil or both. The Japanese kitsune, a fox, takes the form of a young girl, a beautiful woman or an old man in order to seduce or advise confused humans. The Norse God Loki changes shape to help or hinder the efforts of other Norse gods. And, in the case of medieval folklore, the lively toads, seals, cats, birds, mountains, rivers, forests and ghosts shapeshift at will to assist or prevent humans from fulfilling their life purpose. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, shapeshifting tales were so numerous that it was difficult to keep track of them. Those who did, often treated their content as useful vehicles for entertainment and childhood education, an approach that did not always do justice to the potential meaning of the tale.

In 1931, Stith Thompson and Antti Arne published a new indexing system that not only opened the way for researchers to categorize and compare categories of tales, but also encouraged the exploration of specific aspects of specific tales. In doing so, they strengthened the argument for the importance and validity of folklore as an object of serious study. In honor of their work, this study will present an analytical reading of *The Serpent-Woman*, an unusual shapeshifting tale that calls for careful scrutiny because it questions the how and why of shapeshifting. For purposes of clarity, the study primarily confines its investigation to a version of the tale that appears in Jane Yolen's *Folktales from Around the World* (1986), bringing in other versions of shapeshifting tales only when necessary. As a prelude, the study stipulates that *The Serpent-Woman* touches upon the following three discussions of shapeshifter motifs appearing in Garry and El-Shamy's handbook *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore* (2005): "the marriage of humans to beasts, the activities of evil serpents, and the burning of snakeskins." It also stipulates that the main character may possibly inhabit both the second and third of Yolen's three categories of shapeshifters: (1) "the sorceresses or witches who have learned to shapeshift at will," (2) "the humans who have been enchanted by a witch or magic-maker" and (3) "the supernatural beings that transform themselves, sometimes unwittingly, with the assistance of natural forces, such as 'the pull of the moon, the turn of the tide, or the sloughing of a skin'" (Yolen, 295). And finally, it stipulates that one of the ways this tale differs from other versions of shapeshifting tales is that it fails to provide what folklorist Roger Abrahams refers to as a strong "rationale" for containing a shapeshifter (Yolen, 7). Indeed, the details of this tale neither confirm nor deny the main character's ability to shapeshift. Thus, although the tale claims shapeshifter status, it fails to achieve the promise of its title. Nevertheless, in spite of this failure, it continues to intrigue and even haunt the reader's imagination long after its conclusion.

One of the most interesting aspects of the tale is that it rests on a simple plot that is complicated by the interplay between history and folklore. According to Yolen, it draws upon the “Spanish version of the lonely wife tale and falls in the category of the distaff side of the marriage-to-a-monster story”(489). A young woman, Doña Pepa, falls in love with her elderly husband’s nephew. When the nephew rejects her, she continues to pursue him until the end of the tale. Although the plot is familiar, a careful reading of the details of the plot reveals that Doña Pepa’s story contains a number of meanings that are never confirmed by what eventually appears to be an unreliable narrator.

The plot is divided into three sections: (1) the introduction to Don Juan and his wife, Doña Pepa, (2) the development of a conflict between Doña Pepa and Don Luis and (3) a resolution of the conflict that is in keeping with the traditional folktales. The tale begins as follows:

There lived in the twelfth century a certain Don Juan de Amarillo, who dwelt not far from Cordova. Although not very young himself, he had a handsome young wife, whom he adored. He introduced her to all his friends; but though she made great sensation by her beauty wherever she appeared, yet in some way or other, she contrived to make enemies and no friends among either sex. (Yolen, 315)

The opening immediately suggests the beginnings of an unusual tale. First, instead of focusing on common folk who lived during a vague time period, such as “Once upon a time” or “There once was,” this tale focuses on a man of noble birth, whose early history is well known to the inhabitants of the region and latter history is shrouded in mystery. Unlike most folktales, the action takes place in a specific time and place, twelfth-century Spain, in Al-Andalus, during the latter part of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), a period that is traditionally credited by historians as responsible for three achievements: the growth of the largest city in the Western and Middle Eastern world (Córdoba); remarkable developments in the areas of literature, architecture, science and technology; and relatively harmonious interactions between Jews, Muslims and Christians. Although the inhabitants of the latter part of the dynasty were aware of Christian campaigns from the North that were attempting to recapture the territory that had been lost during previous centuries, the *Reconquista* (722–1,492), as it was called, took the form of a slow, periodic movement of small bands of Christian warriors across what was then, according to the Muslims, considered to be Muslim territory. By the end of twelfth century, when our tale begins, the Al-Andalus region was beginning to experience the decline of what historians later referred to as the Golden Age of Córdoba (10th century). The stunning, Islamic buildings; the beautiful flowers, fountains and parks; the old families were still there, but the spirit of peace among the Jews, Christians, and Muslims that had been encouraged by the Umayyad Caliphate was beginning to weaken. A noticeable number of inhabitants were converting to Islam. And women were losing some of their freedoms. There was a hint of tension in the air, and some were looking toward the North, to Seville and the Christian Kings, to complete the restoration that had begun several centuries earlier. At the moment this tale takes place, it appears that as long as the taxes were paid to the government in Córdoba, the inhabitants of the region would live in peace. This tale, however, suggests a slightly different vision of the period, one in which ancestral memories, hidden superstitions and competing versions of history fuel the inhabitants’ suspicions of all newcomers who come to live in the land.

The tale’s introductory paragraph offers a sample of what Dorson describes as the “submerged culture(s) that live(s) behind the shadow of the official civilization” (37), a glimpse of what Yolen refers to as “a landscape, a custom, a moral outlook, or a very faint accent or flavor of that locality” (xxi), one which, as Yolen further suggests, “the thumbprint of history” (5).

No one knew where she came from, nor what her name was before she was married . . . All that was certain was that Don Juan had been absent from home for many years, and that he had never been heard from by either friend or foe in all that time, and that he returned as suddenly as he departed, but bringing with him a wife. (Yolen 315)

While the description of Don Juan's former connection to the region assuages the townspeople's curiosity, it also places the burden of unknown lineage on his wife. From the very beginning, Doña Pepa is labeled a person of interest because the townspeople, although outwardly accepting of strangers, are privately wary of new arrivals, especially those with no background or those whose recent history could threaten the stability of their lives. Even the narrator appears to have an interest in questioning the couple's background, as he follows his short introduction of the couple's background, but his curiosity stretches far beyond their history as he pauses to consider Doña Pepa's unusual beauty and her unusual body movements in a voice that simultaneously mocks her presence and establishes his superiority as one who intends to entertain the audience with witty suggestions or opinions that are ingenious, or unreliable or both.

She was a wonderfully handsome woman, with regular features, dark eyes, and a head like that of a beautiful statue. Her figure was singularly flexible and lithe. But in spite of her beauty, people looked askance at her and felt, without being able to say why, that there was something wrong about her. She had some curious tricks of manner which were startling. When she was pleased, she would raise her head so that it seemed really to lengthen two or three inches and would sway her body to and fro with delight. Whereas, if anything displeased her, or she disliked anyone, her head seemed to flatten out, and the touch of her hand was like a bite. . . . In short, she seemed as spiteful a woman as she could possibly be. Some villagers were convinced she was a strolling player that Don Juan had rescued from ill-treatment, and others thought that she had "bewitched" the old Don Juan by means of love-philters and noxious herbs. . . . These stories were none of them true . . . (Yolen 315)

Thus, the narrator ends the opening section with a sophisticated rhetorical move that (1) denies everything he previously suggested, (2) raises questions about the tale's title, (3) suggests that he (the narrator) cannot be trusted and (4) sets the stage for further denials and contradictions. Later, he tells the audience that "although Doña Pepa gets along well with her husband, they are often overheard arguing in private" (Yolen 316). And eventually, he announces that "her dismissiveness was such that even the most faithful servant eventually left her husband's employ." Thus, even though her behavior could have been attributed to many causes – fatigue, illness, a lack of good manners, a misplaced belief in her superiority – the narrator chooses to tell his audience that she was amused by the gossip. "She delighted in hearing all the ill-nature stories that she could," he comments, as he begins to focus on the character who would call her identity into question.

Throughout the beginning and middle sections of the narrative, Doña Pepa's behavior is carefully juxtaposed to that of Don Luis de Aragon, Don Juan's nephew, the relative that Don Juan chose to inherit his estate. The narrator describes Don Luis as an affable, kindhearted, young Spanish gentleman, well-liked by the townspeople. Although he grew up poor, the narrator and others treat him with respect:

He was a frank-open-faced and open-hearted young man, about twenty-seven years old, who at once won the hearts of all who saw him. He was not at all jubilant or overweening at the honors thrust upon him as his uncle's heir but spoke quite ingeniously of his former poverty and the disadvantages as well as pleasures of his boyhood, to his aunt's intense disgust.(Yolen 316)

The placement of the word "disgust" at the end of the description emphasizes Doña Pepa's excessive pride by calling attention to Don Luis's humble attitude. Hence, from the very beginning, the narrator attempts to convince his audience of the natural goodness of Don Luis and provocative and spiteful nature of Doña Pepa.

Shortly thereafter, the narrator presents a damaging portrayal of an incident that occurs in the Amarillo household. One night, as Don Luis returns home late, he sees a serpent rise from its coiled position on the stairs, slither upstairs to his uncle's bedroom and disappear under the door. The next morning, when Doña Pepa demands to know why Don Luis burst into his uncle's bedroom claiming to have seen a serpent and insisting on searching of the premises, Don Luis politely refuses to answer and tries to leave the room. In response,

Doña Pepa grabs his arm and whispers, "You shall not treat me with such disdain. You shall learn to fear me if you cannot love me (Yolen, 319)." Shortly thereafter, Don Luis's arm begins to swell. Doña Pepa has taken control of the action. As she speaks for the first and only time in the narrative, her words echo throughout the remainder of the tale, raising new questions about her character. Although threatening, her discreet outburst also suggests that there may be other reasons for her spite: she may be a woman who reacts bitterly to her plight. By attaching the word "fear" to the word "love," she raises the possibility that she is simply a woman who desires the affection and attention of an attractive man and does not know how to communicate her feelings. The possibility of a less savage interpretation of her character is immediately contradicted by force with which she grabs his arm, thus conveying the message she could also be a strong woman who will not hesitate to use force to achieve her goal. In response, Don Luis eventually comes to accept that Doña Pepa is capable of carrying out her threat, but he is still not completely convinced that she is a serpent.

As the tale continues, the narrator and Don Luis further investigate the mystery of Doña Pepa's identity. Deeply concerned about the wound on his arm, Don Luis consults a character, referred to as a hermit, who spreads wet leaves over the wound and offers a diagnosis.

... It's a serpent bite, the hermit announces.

No, it is not, "interrupted Don Luis." My aunt grasped my arm in a frenzy of rage, and this is the result "Worse still," answers the hermit. "A serpent-woman's bite is sometimes deadly."

"Can you do nothing for me?" cried Don Luis in despair. "I hate her, and I have been persecuted by her for weeks."

Yes, and you will be persecuted by her still more . . . If you can keep awake you will probably get the better. But if you sleep one minute, you will be at her mercy.

What shall I do to her? I would do anything short of murdering her, said Don Luis excitedly.

Take your sword, when you find her a little way from the door, hack off a piece of the snake, and see the effect. Then come to me again. (Yolen 318)

The background and advice of the hermit proves to be as mysterious as that of actions and behavior of Doña Pepa. The audience is told that the hermit is "extremely pious," but the conversation between the hermit and Don Luis does not indicate that the hermit's religious beliefs enter into his professional work. Furthermore, when referring to the hermit, the narrator never uses the words like sheikh, prophet, Jinn, priest, soothsayer, shaman, wizard, magician, witch or devil, nor does the hermit initially admit to any special knowledge of science, religion or magic. Although Don Luis initially objects to the diagnosis, when the hermit admits to having some knowledge of shapeshifters, Don Luis begins to believe him. "It's a serpent's bite," the hermit announces in a matter-of-fact clinical tone, but before he can get much further, Don Luis interrupts him. "No, it is not," he responds. "My aunt grabbed my arm in a frenzy of rage, and this is the result." The hermit then goes beyond his preliminary diagnosis. "Worse still," he answers, "A serpent-women's bite is sometimes deadly." The hermit then ends his examination with a prophecy rather than a prognosis. "If you stay awake, you will get the better of her. But if you sleep one minute, you will be at her mercy" (Yolen 318). He then advises Don Luis to cut off the tail of the serpent and report back to him.

Although capable of healing others, the hermit is not the typical mysterious or religious healer that occasionally appears in folklore. He is a medical practitioner who also believes in the existence of unknown and unnatural creatures, a lone figure who will not bend to the gossip of society, but also will not deny that he has some knowledge of shapeshifters. During the conversation between the two men, Don Luis's behavior begins to change. At first, he

denies the hermit's diagnosis. Then he begs the hermit to cure him. Then he engages in an emotional outburst in which he begs the hermit "to do something." For the first time in the narrative, he drops his usual confident, affable behavior and confesses to an adolescent frustration. "I hate her, and I have been persecuted by her for weeks," he exclaims (Yolen 318). Clearly, Don Luis's contact with an evil something that may not be human has affected his ability to understand and respond calmly to his situation. He is desperate but still claims he will not harm the creature that is threatening him. Eventually, he does as he is told and, when a serpent enters his bedroom, he raises his sword, cuts two pieces off its tail and puts them in a drawer. Later, he discovers that one of the two severed pieces resemble several toes connected to the instep of a human foot. A similar oddity occurs when, on advice from the hermit, he lashes at the head, cuts off the head and watches as the neck and head portion, followed by the separated body, disappear under his uncle's bedroom door, at which point he realizes the creature can heal and/or regenerate, and therefore will not be easily killed.

Until this point, Don Luis still has some doubt about the connection between Doña Pepa and the serpent, but as each battle is followed by changes in Doña Pepa's physical appearance, the mystery of her identity appears to unravel. When Don Luis sees Doña Pepa a few days after the first major skirmish, she walks with a limp. After the second skirmish, she disappears for a month and reappears with a silk handkerchief covering her missing right hand. Although Don Juan attempts to provide "plausible" explanations for these visible changes, it is clear that the narrator, Don Luis or the audience are convinced. The limp was caused by a sharp object that penetrated her foot while she was sleepwalking, Don Luis explains. The month-long absence from the family and the missing right hand are the result of an abscess that eventually required amputation of that hand. Meanwhile, Don Luis continues to defend himself against what he perceives as life-threatening attacks from the serpent until one day, he experiences a chance encounter with Jorge, a former servant of his grandfather and newly retired servant of Don Juan, his uncle. During their short conversation, Jorge bears witness to the existence of a serpent in the villa.

I have been anxious for a long time about my master and you. Is he well? and what is going on there. I did not like to call at the house, because I left of my own accord. But I had to leave, for I could not bear to live with that horrid snake in the house, Doña Pepa.

"What do you mean by 'snake in the house', Jorge?" asked Don Luis. Did you ever *see* a snake in that house?

"Indeed I have," replied the old servant indignantly. "She followed me all over the house, until I nearly lost my wits. If I went into the kitchen, it was there; in my room, it was there; and at last, I went away because when I spoke to my master about it, he grew so angry that I saw that I thought he was lying. Have you ever seen the snake yourself, Señor, for everyone else who has lived there has?"

"Yes, I have seen the same thing myself, if you press me so hard," answered Don Luis; "but how can I do more than I have? What can I do more . . . short of murder?"

"One thing more." said Jorge earnestly, "one thing more, and that is to watch until she is out. Go to the chest in the master's room, under the left- hand window, and open it. You will find a queer skin, striped like a serpent's, folded up in the right-hand corner. Burn that, and you will find that the snake will not torment you anymore."

"Are you sure?" inquired Don Luis earnestly.

"Quite sure," answered Jorge, as earnestly.(Yolen 320)

In spite of the irrefutable evidence that Don Luis has now collected, he still hesitates to act even though he has been given instructions on how to get rid of her. Instead, he briefly consults the hermit, who advises him to tell his uncle if she torments him again.

A month after he sees the hermit, he accidentally comes across Doña Pepa in the hall and notices that both her physical and emotional condition have deteriorated. When asked about her health, she does not respond and shows no signs of anger or aggression. In fact, she responds as if she were a demure maiden who is embarrassed to appear before him in such a weak state. Her visage “colored deeply,” the narrator begins, “but[*she*] answered with much dignity; she looked thin and pale, and her face was worn with pain.” Enlightened, but still confused, Don Luis walks away. Directly after they part, he begins to see snakes everywhere, “in the courtyard, on the stairs, in his bedroom, in every nook and corner,” and in all his possessions, “in his boots, under his rug, over his clothes.” His emotional condition begins to deteriorate, “He thinks he is going mad” (Yolen 321). When he awakes one morning to find the serpent quietly wrapped around his body, he brandishes his sword as if he were a medieval Berserker warrior under a trans-like spell, and furiously cuts off several body parts of the snake.

After this incident, he comes to his senses and decides to proceed with caution. When he approaches Don Juan to ask about Doña Pepa’s condition, Don Juan does not respond. After his third attempt, Don Juan breaks his silence but does not admit that she is shapeshifter. Instead, he confesses to knowledge of Doña Pepa’s unusual conduct and gives Don Luis permission to act for the good of all. The narrator then tells the audience that Don Juan had no idea of what Don Luis was planning to do, thus assuring that he would not be punished for any wrongdoing.

Well, I can say nothing, nor can I help you in any way. This much I can tell you, that I sympathize most deeply with you for that snake has been the bane of my life.

“Then, said Don Luis earnestly,” you will not blame me if I punish the snake the next time as it deserves.”

“No I should not blame you, if you can do it”, sighed old Don Juan, little dreaming that his nephew already possessed the secret of killing her.(Yolen 322)

The end happens quickly. After receiving permission to kill the snake from Don Juan, Don Luis finds the serpent skin in the upstairs bedroom trunk at the same moment that Doña Pepa and Don Juan arrive home after a late night out. He quickly folds the skin and hides it in his arms. As Doña Pepa doubles over with pain and falls on the couch downstairs, Don Luis throws the skin into the upstairs fireplace. When she takes her last breath downstairs, the snakeskin shrinks into nothing upstairs.

“She is dead,” announces the physician, “and I cannot discover what was the matter nor what could have killed her. She was in excellent health, so far as I could make out, an hour ago, when I was called in to see her for convulsions; and now, with no bad symptoms at all, she has suddenly died. I cannot understand the cause of it all.” (Yolen 322)

No one knows how or why she died, nor does anyone mourn her death. When an old nun later reveals that while preparing the body for the funeral, she found the figure of a large snake distinctly traced along the length of Doña Pepa’s body, Don Juan does not react to this discovery. Instead, the narrator announces that Don Luis and Don Juan “lived happily together for years,” and that “only the hermit and one or two others knew the secret of the serpent-woman” (Yolen 323).

The primary focus of this tale is on the question of Doña Pepa’s identity. The title brands her as a shapeshifter, but she never admits to being a shapeshifter, nor does her husband or her husband’s nephew directly accuse her of being a shapeshifter. Although the townspeople and former servants suspect she is not human, and the hermit whom Don Luis consults calls her a shapeshifter, in truth, her behavior is unlike that of other shapeshifting creatures that appear in the folklore shapeshifting indexes. She does not express the same yearnings for her

place of origin as the Valkyrie swans or Nordic seals that shed their original skins, shapeshift into young maidens, marry, take up residence with humans, then dawn their skins once again and either stay with their human family or return to their places of origin to live happily ever after (Yolen, 310–312), nor does she undergo the same punishment as the Cat-Wife, whose paw is chopped off when it tries to unlatch a door and escape for a night out (Nolan 313–314). She also never lives the absurd serpent life of the Peruvian shapeshifter in Yolen’s collection, who first appears as a very thin human male crawling on the ground, then goes through a series of shifts in which he stands to meet his future wife, marries, returns to his serpent form, hides in a large hole in his wife’s family shed, grows extremely fat, fathers a brood of baby serpents and is eventually murdered by a gang of village thugs who also hack his babies to death (Yolen 323–328).

Doña Pepa is neither an innocent young swan nor an absurd fat snake. She never displays the stretching of sinews, gnashing of teeth and mesmerizing disrobing that accompanies the shapeshifting of werewolves, were-frogs, were-leopards, were-jaguars and other were-creatures of European folklore. Most importantly, she never shapeshifts in front of any character in her tale. With the exception of mimicking the body language of a serpent during dinner, grabbing Don Luis’s arm during breakfast, and later, according to what has proved to be a somewhat divisive and possibly deranged narrator, quietly curling around Don Luis’s body while he is sleeping in his bedroom, she never touches nor gets physically close to anyone in the tale.

When compared to others of her kind, her appearance and behavior appear to be very limited. In contrast, for example, to a Ukrainian tale about a female shapeshifter that speaks of a woman who convinces a young man to marry her, at which point she turns into a serpent, asks her husband to give her 3 kisses, returns his kisses with “the knowledge of the world,” sends him off to marry the king’s daughter and then disappears into the forest presumably to do more “good deeds” (Bain, 2009), Doña Pepa’s outward behavior could be described as no different than the behavior of an insecure lovestruck passionate woman. If Doña Pepa truly is a shapeshifter, then she is a shapeshifter whose activity is limited to trying to find comfort in her attraction to her husband’s nephew. For these and the other reasons, the ending of *The Serpent’s Tale* is puzzling. Although versions of evil women, shapeshifters, snakes, innocent victims and dire consequences abound in the indexes of folk and fairy tales, few feature a main female character who is suspected of being evil, appears to change for the good, and then dies due to circumstances that are linked to the actions of another main character and a narrator who may or may be stable. Although the ending justifies a “happily ever after” scenario for Don Luis and Don Juan, it does not justify Doña Pepa’s fate. In fact, the serpent-tracing found on Doña Pepa’s body after her death appears as an afterthought, a feeble attempt to link Doña Pepa’s fate to a satisfactory ending, a rhetorical move that does not clarify Doña Pepa’s identity, but does invite further study.

To review, we have already established that the tale boasts a rhetorical sophistication that reaches beyond that of most folktales. The narrator’s strong use of figurative language, ironic overtones and melodramatic moments mocks the very motifs that the story attempts to emulate. It complicates rather than resolves the mystery of Doña Pepa’s identity. Also, as has already been mentioned, the tale refers to a historical period that could explain possible biases and superstitions on the part of the minor characters and the narrator. Further study, however, reveals that a number of explanations for the contents and ending of this tale can be found in the newer disciplinary fields of sociology, psychology and cultural studies, as well as older fields of science and religion.

First, Doña Pepa enters the tale with no identification, no past, no present, no proof of existence. She cannot or does not want to produce the credentials that are required of a society that places a great emphasis on bloodlines. Her only means of financial support is her husband, Don Juan, who was born into a wealthy patriarchal family that has lived

comfortably in the aristocratic society of Al-Andalus for an undetermined number of centuries. His identity is grounded in the annals of Spanish history. Hers, on the other hand, are initially left to the whims of contemporary and/or past sociopsychological interpretation. With the exception of her uncle's nephew and a handful of unseen, unnamed servants, the couple's villa contains no other residents, no males or females to guide Doña Pepa through life in her new surroundings. Unlike any of the other characters in the tale, she must contend with the feelings of isolation that come with marrying someone outside her tribe. While trying to make friends with those around her, she exhibits a smug indifference and spiteful attitude that, in turn, elicits anger and resentment from those around her. Although she enjoys wielding power, she is disinterested in the rewards and/or penalties that power brings her. Having experienced "otherness" in a variety of forms, she will not allow her struggle to impede what could be a deeper struggle to comprehend and accept her own selfhood. She is a feminist long before there were feminists, with an attitude that attracts the support of a contemporary readers, especially those who support diversity.

Her character is juxtaposed to the character of Don Luis, who enjoys playing the role of a modest, confident, attractive and affable young man that has earned his uncle's trust and affection and is now expected to fulfill the obligations of his inheritance and newly acknowledged birthright. His one weakness is that he is more thoughtful than the typical twelfth-century warrior-hero. When in doubt, he quietly attempts to clarify his confusion. When convinced of the need to defend himself or his family, he turns into a man of action. On the surface, he is always busy. During the two to four months that he lives in the household, he listens to the ideas of others, observes Doña Pepa's mannerisms, discovers a serpent in the villa, observes its behavior, suspects a connection between Doña Pepa and the serpent, receives an arm wound, visits a healer, is informed that Doña Pepa is a shapeshifter, a serpent-woman, discovers a serpent in his bedroom, cuts off two lengths of its body, discovers one section has transformed into a human toes, but does not verify this finding with the hermit, consults a former servant who tells him that he also has seen the serpent, visits the hermit again, has several more battles with the serpent, has nightmares about serpents, sees serpents everywhere, thinks he is going mad, asks his uncle for permission to get rid of the snake, and when he does so achieves one goal (the defense of his family) at the expense of the other (discovering Doña Pepa's true identity). In short, he performs his duty to his family with the honor expected of a twelfth-century medieval knight but fails to understand the sociopsychological forces that are shaping his own and Doña Pepa's characters. What begins as a curiosity becomes a compulsion.

In addition to the tangle of historical, literary and socio-psychological issues that support or detract from the surface and deeper promise of the tale, the narrative invites scientific and religious explanations for what becomes Don Luis's second goal, the clarification of Doña Pepa's identity. Perhaps the villa harbors more than one snake. This would explain the reason for Don Luis's madness. It also would explain why the serpent Don Luis first sees is black, and the snakeskin at the end of the tale is striped. Finally, it would account for Jorge's and the hermit's knowledge of snakes and snakebites. A very different explanation could be that both Doña Pepa and the region's inhabitants retain faint memories of their ancestors' pre-Islamic, pre-Hebraic, pre-Christian predecessors' serpent worship and cannot ignore the fear and awe serpent creatures inspire. If such is the case, then the suspicion that Doña Pepa's behaviors ignite could be explained by psychological theory rather than environmental observations or historical studies.

Perhaps the most intriguing possibility is that Doña Pepa has been possessed by a Jinn that has shapeshifted into a serpent. This could explain many of her behaviors. Knowledge of Jinn predates Islam's formal birth and was integrated into its belief structure during the first centuries. Jinns are mentioned in the Qur'an and the cultural awareness of their existence can be found in most areas where Islam is practiced. According to some sources, they were created from smokeless fire and can live for over 1000 years. They occupy a plane somewhere between humans and angels, and something similar to a veil separates the Jinn plane from the

human plane. There are good and bad Jinns. In general, they do not want to cross borders, but have been known to accidentally wander into the human plane. They can shapeshift into any creature of choice and therefore may take on a human shape at any time. They have fierce ‘temperaments, and their presence is said to affect the mental condition of the bodies they occupy. Prehistoric Jinn primarily liked to shapeshift into serpents. Although Doña Pepa does not exhibit the power of an Islamic Jinn, she does exhibit the behavior of a human possessed by a Jinn. She has difficulty communicating with those around her. Her human body deteriorates with each blow that is inflicted on her serpent body. And her gradual silence could reflect the growth of a trans-like state that is brought on when the Jinn shifts or when the Jinn controls its subject’s shifting. This could explain why Doña Pepa eventually becomes so weak that she loses all sense of her previous and current self. In the end, when the shredded snakeskin is burned, it shrinks into nothing. Although the tale offers no further explanation, Yolen’s notes remind us that “the burning of a snakes in (motif D721.3: Disenchantment by destroying skin) is a death sentence” (Yolen 489). If Doña Pepa has really been hypnotized by a Jinn, folk and fairy tale logic would also suggest that when the energy exerted by the fire forces the serpent skin to shrink, it also forces the Jinn to abandon its serpent shape and give up its control of Doña Pepa’s body. In other words, as the fiery energy of the burning snakeskin forces the Jinn’s departure, it leaves traces of a scar along the length of her body, and with the appearance of visible scar, the shadows of alternative possibilities disappear, all guilt is banished, and those who remain live happily ever after.

In conclusion, Yolen’s version of *The Serpent-Woman* is much more than a superstition or a children’s tale. It is first and foremost a tale that challenges the accuracy of words, concepts, emotions and knowledge as it directly or indirectly questions our perceptions and shapes our understanding of the behaviors of others. Second, it is a tale that broadens our understanding of how our imagination and disciplinary knowledge can work together to limit, confine, inspire or counteract misconceptions about our past and our present. Third, it is not an ordinary shapeshifter tale. It is what Yolen would call an “art tale” (7), a tale in which contradiction and irony open the narrative to new ideas and questions, a tale that allows one reader to rejoice as Don Luis and Don Juan go off to live happily ever after while a second reader mourns the death of Doña Pepa and remaining readers are haunted by the ironies contained in the narrative. Fourth, it is a tale that reflects the indomitable spirit that inspires folk and fairy tales by providing a glimpse into the shifting nature of the perceptions and thoughts that affect our understanding of the human condition. We speak of thoughts taking shape or changing, yet we cannot fully embrace the concept of physical bodies shifting shapes. Perhaps someday, when humanity becomes more accustomed to the inner-workings of the human mind, imagination, and spirit, we will be able to reshape our reactions to the sudden appearance of shapeshifters in our midst.

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