

Mlalija, the Orphaned Princess: Translation

They once said, may God keep us from the tattlers unless they are raiders or wealthy.

There were two witches, a husband and a wife. They once went to the woods and came across a little orphaned girl with astounding long hair. The couple decided to raise her. They suggested that she should call them “mum” and “dad.” They locked her up in a tower with no doors. The couple would go wandering in the woods during the daytime to hunt for birds, insects, donkeys or whatever they could lay their hands on. In the evening, they would head back with food for their girl. The food consisted of animal meat, either a baby goat or a lamb.

Upon their arrival, usually at dusk, they would regularly stand at the tower steps, and the mother witch would sing: “Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear daughter Mlalija, oh my Mlalija!” The girl would throw her hair down and her mother would climb up. The father witch would sing in turn: “Throw me your long plaits of hair so I can climb the tower, dear Mlalija, oh my Mlalija.” Once the couple were in the tower, they would feed the little girl before going to sleep. Then, when the little girl got full, she would peacefully go to sleep.

The same routine took place in the mornings as they asked her to help them descend to go hunting in the woods. And so she did. The couple went out to eat the whole day in the woods. When they got back, they brought her food. The mother witch sang again, “Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear daughter Mlalija, oh my dear Mlalija.” The daughter did so.

The girl grew up quickly and became a beautiful woman. One day, the king's horsemen came across the tower and saw her. "Oh, woman, we are thirsty, can you please give us some water?", they requested. She replied, "I cannot hand it to you as there is no door to this tower." The horsemen said, "Please, figure something out." The girl threw down her hair, the way she would do with her witch parents, to pass out water. The horsemen, being fascinated by her beauty and the length of the plaits of her hair, cut off a lock of her hair and took it to their king.

In seeing the beautiful woman, the horsemen forgot about hunting. When they came back late in the evening, the king, surprised, asked,

"What have you been doing the whole day? You have not brought me anything? Didn't you go hunting?"

The horsemen replied, "Honourable king, we can explain if you allow us."

"Go ahead," said the king.

"We saw a beautiful woman and forgot about the hunt. Here is a lock of her hair. We asked her for water. And as she lives in a tower with no doors, she handed us water using her hair. We cut a lock of it off and we thought you might want to have a look at it."

The king ordered them to take him there. So they did. The king asked the girl to help him climb the tower. The girl replied, "My father and mother are witches; I will not help you climb as they will eat you up."

"Just get me in and I will hide when they get back," insisted the king.

The girl threw her hair down and helped the king to climb. They stayed there the rest of the day until sunset when the witches came back. The mother witch

sang: “Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear daughter Mlalija, oh my Mlalija!” The girl threw her hair down and her mother climbed up. The male witch sang in turn: “Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear Mlalija, oh my Mlalija!”

Suspecting the presence of a stranger in the tower, the father witch said, “I smell something unlike Mlalija’s odour. Is there someone here, Mlalija?” The girl said, “There is nobody here, nobody can climb the tower.” The father witch asked his wife to inspect the place by checking under all the pieces of furniture, except for the one Mlalija was laying her feet on.¹

The mother witch inspected the whole place, but in vain. “I still smell something strange but we have not found anybody,” said the mother witch. In the morning, they asked the girl to help them go down the tower. So, she helped the father descend and told her mother about what had happened. She said that the king was at their house, that they would not find her home in the evening as she was to leave with the king, and asked her mother to take care of herself. Then, she helped her mother out of the tower. The mother witch burst in tears and kept crying the whole day.

During one of their meals in the woods, the husband noticed the wife’s tears and asked her, “Why won’t you eat? Why are you crying? What is wrong?”

“I cannot help but cry,” the wife replied.

In the evening, the couple came back and brought a lamb. When they got home, the father witch, unaware of his daughter’s absence, kept singing:

¹ According to the source text, Mlalija lays her feet on a wooden slate that is most often used to prepare bread dough. This act is meant to elevate the protagonist to a state of loftiness and elegance because of her beauty. She has to keep her feet clean the whole day. The tale is built on supernatural patterns and one of these pertains to the wooden slate that serves, in the tale, to hide the king, although it is not big enough to properly conceal him.

“Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear Mlalija, oh my Mlalija.” He got no response and asked his wife to sing in turn. The mother witch started, “Throw me your long plaits of hair so we can climb the tower, dear Mlalija, oh my Mlalija.”

No response. Then, they sat down outside their tower and the wife confessed that the king had taken the girl. The king married the orphaned girl and had a wedding party that lasted over seven days and nights.

Thus ends my story, from the wicked may it be kept; in peace shall I find my path.