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The Attic of Faerie

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Abstract

Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 12. Discusses relationship of fairy tales to older myths, and warns against oversimplification when fairy tales are concerned. Many variations exist of the same tale, and generalizations are unwise.

Additional Keywords

Faerie; Fairy tales—Relation to Myth; Myth—Relation to fairy tales; Brad W. Foster

The Attic of Faerie

Guest of Honor Speech given at the 12th Annual Mythopoeic Conference

Elizabeth M. Pope

In the medieval ballad, when Thomas the minstrel goes off with the fairy lady, they come to a place where three roads meet, and she asks him:

O, do you see the broad, broad road
That lies along the lily leven?
That is the road to wickedness,
Though some call it the way to heaven.

And do you see the narrow road,
That's thick beset with thorns and briars?
That is the path to righteousness,
But after it there's few inquires.

And do you see the little road
That winds along the ferny brae?
That is the way to fairy land,
Where you and I this night must gae.

So they fared on and further on,
The steed went swifter than the wind,
Until they came to a desert place,
And living land was left behind.

As these lines imply, in traditional folk lore fairy land lies apart from the traditional values of our civilization. It is ot a "living land", a place that can be put on a map, as the medieval map-makers still did with the Garden of Eden. In fact, it is better not to call it a land at all, but as Tolkien does, "Faerie" -- a sort of other world in which any one of us may find ourselves at any moment, when the hill opens, or we wander into the midsummer wood, or follow the sound of distant music, or make the mistake of sleeping under an elder tree. Human beings are not at home there. It has its own inhabitants, its own customs, and above all its own codes of conduct and good manners, which stray mortals disregard at their peril. Anyone who puts a foot wrong in Faerie is lucky if he only comes to himself again out on the cold hillside with all the magic gold turned to withered leaves in his hand. He is more likely to find himself permanently attached to a golden goose, or with a pie fastened on the end of his nose, or with toads and snakes falling out of his mouth every time he opens it.

Sometimes for a moment or so we seem to recognise familiar shapes or voices or activities, but they never behave in quite the style to which we are accustomed. The only place of which Faerie really does remind me is the attic in my grandmother's great rambling Victorian house. Grandmother was one of those people who never throw anything away if they can possibly help it; and the attic was crammed to bursting point with all sorts of furnishings which had become too outdated or shabby to use downstairs, but which Grandmother could not bring herself to give up. When I was a little girl, nothing there was ever touched except when visiting grandchildren were allowed to rummage it out to "play with" or "dress up" on rainy days. I can still remember going up the steep wooden stairs, smelling of dried apples and dust, and wandering about in the glorious jammed crazy tangle above. Everything was confusedly mixed together, and none of us knew exactly what we were playing with -- the spinning wheel, the Civil War uniform, the hobble skirts, the torn satin slippers, the washstand, the tattered books, the chamber pots, the carriage whips, the rusty muskets, the broken china -- but at least we did know that it was all exciting and entertaining; and we were always grateful to Grandmother because she never allowed my sensible and advanced parents to clean out the attic and send its contents to the village dump. In much the same way, the Middle Ages refused to throw away certain inherited relics of belief, custom, story, and doctrine which had become too worn out and unfashionable to use downstairs in the exquisitely swept and ordered world

of St Thomas Aquinas, but which they could not bring themselves to throw away; and it was the special regions of the mind in which these memories accumulated that eventually becomes Faerie.

It is easy to see what is happening if one looks at the process by which ancient myth turns into fairy tale. Anyone can easily see that there are many fairy — tales which echo true myth -- for instance, to take only three examples from Lang's Yellow and Violet Fairy Books: "The Lute Player" is based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice; "The Seven-Headed Serpent" is a garbled version of Theseus and the Minotaur; "The Three Brothers" incorporates features from the Norse myth of Ragnarok and the Twilight of the Gods. But all this material is handled in a very curious way. To begin with, no gods are present, only a magician in "The Three Brothers" and a wise woman in the "Seven Headed Serpent"; the lost love in "The Lute Player", instead of going to Hades like the dead Eurydice, is merely captured by an enemy king and imprisoned in a far country. The fairy in the ballad specifically denies any claim to divinity: "I'm not the Queen of Heaven, Thomas / I never carried my head sae high . . ." Secondly, there is no real tragedy in the fairy tales. Unlike the story of Orpheus, "The Lute Player" ends triumphantly with the musician winning over the enemy king by song and returning home with the lost love. The conclusion of "The Seven-Headed Serpent" is not overshadowed by the hero's desertion of his princess or by the suicide of his father. In "The Three Brothers" two tiny children are shown trying to save themselves from destruction by hiding in the leaves of a gigantic magic tree like the only surviving human beings left on Middle Earth after the holocaust that destroys our world in Norse mythology. But the fairy tale lacks the terrible and profound implications of the myth. The tree is not the World Tree, nor are the children the last representatives of the human race — but only the babies of a magician; the hero protects them from the serpent who is threatening them and has no trouble killing the monster with his magic sword.

This does not mean that the fairy tale is a cheap and debased version of the myth. J. R. R. Tolkien pointed out long ago that the Happy Ending is essential to the form — "almost I would venture to say that all complete fairy tales must have it." Certainly, fairy tales that end unhappily, like "The Yellow Dwarf" or "The Death of the Sun Hero," leave us with a sense of frustration and incompleteness, as if the story had somehow been cheated or deprived of its due. "The Death of the Sun Hero" is especially interesting because once again it is a tale which is based on Norse mythology — this time the legend that the moon-child and the sun-child are perpetually pursued through the skies by fierce wolves who will eventually overtake and devour them at the end of the world. However, in the fairy tale, the sun-child has become only a young prince in golden armor who undertakes to defend a magic tree against the attack of a wolf pack, but fails because of his arrogance and conceit. The trouble is that what has once been a deep and subtle image of time and death hunting down all the world has now been reduced to a cautionary moral tale, on the same level as those over-wrought Victorian stories about little boys who were drowned or gored by a mad bull if they played hookey from Sunday school. The real fairy tale does not go in for this kind of moral over-kill. It is true that in the real fairy tales a basically good character almost always does something wrong, and is invariably punished for it -- savagely -- but no basically good character is ever killed or completely ruined for his mistake. Perhaps this is true because, as Bruno Bettelheim holds, fairy tales deal primarily with the psychological problems of the immature individual, whereas great myths deal with the vast and impersonal patterns of life. Tolkien, of course, feels that on the contrary the fairy tale is a simple form of evangelium, analogous to the religious conviction that there is joy somewhere beyond the confines of the world and this joy must ultimately prevail. In any event, the Happy Ending is another indication that Faerie does not operate quite according to the laws of Middle Earth.

It is also clear that in all three of the cases I chose for discussion, the story teller has forgotten or misunderstood the original myths. He knows no more about their original purpose than we children knew about the real meaning of the jumbled artifacts in my grandmother's attic. In "The Three Brothers" he has preserved nothing except the picturesque and vivid detail of a great magic tree attacked by a serpent while two children hide among the leaves. In "The Seven-Headed Serpent" the story of Theseus is very badly garbled: the minotaur has become a seven-headed serpent like the hydra, and although the hero tracks it by a trick, there is no labyrinth and so he does not need a clue of thread to help him. Oddly enough, however, the story teller seems to have recalled the memorable detail of the thread and dimly realized that it ought to come into the story somewhere. Since the word "thread" was primarily associated in his mind with the act of spinning, he goes to a good deal of trouble to explain that the wise woman who helps the hero is the Abbess of an institution called the Spinning Convent, a strange order where the nuns have to spend all their time spinning and are punished like the Vestal Virgins if they break their vows. In the "Lute" Player", Orpheus's lyre has naturally become a stringed instrument more familiar to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as it does again in Shakespeare's song and those paintings by artists like Rubens which show Apollo playing a violin or even a bass fiddle. More curiously still, however, the Orpheus figure has become a girl disguised as a boy, who travels to the enemy's court to rescue her husband, who has been captured and imprisoned there. In this case, however, the change may not be a mere aberration, for similar reversals of sex roles can be found in many other fairy tales. It is natural to suppose that in a society like that where the tales originated, dominated by men, their tone must necessarily have been chauvinistic and their heroines mere sex-objects. In fact, the modern scholar Leslie Fiedler, who is a fast man when it comes to a generalization, actually writes:

> The girl's role it defines as essentially passive. Her obligation is to wait, only dreaming, which is to say wishing her Happy Ending, on the dusty hearth or in the enchanted wood, until at last her deliverer arrives.

One can, of course, find many examples of such stories, of which "The Sleeping Beauty" is the most famous; "Cinderella" is not such a good specimen, as she gets up off that dusty hearth and goes to the ball as soon as she has the chance. Leslie Fiedler, however, has not done his homework thoroughly enough. What he totally ignores is the fact that for many fairy tales there are two versions -- one in which the active role is taken by the hero, and another of exactly the same story in which the part is given to the heroine: she is the person who makes the mistakes and has the adventures, undertakes the perilous journey to rescue her love from the prison or the evil spell, and often ends

by awakening him from the enchanted sleep. It would be interesting to know whether these roles shifted when the story teller was a woman or addressing a feminine audience; but of course we shall never know. The fact remains that in this, as in other respects, faerie operates according to laws of its own, and one needs to be careful in dealing with them.

The quick conclusion, the rash assumption, and the easy generalization are especially to be avoided, for the material is vast and intricate, paradoxical and inconsistent, ancient and jumbled to a degree that makes the attic of my childhood seem absurdly bare and uncluttered by comparison. As always in Faerie, it is fatal to be slapdash, patronizing, or rude. It is particularly dangerous to over-simplify the difficulties, or treat them as if one explanation would account for everything. Some elements of the fairy tale may be the debris of lost doctrines, based on hazy memories of the pagan after-world, the shadowy land of the dead, in which time does not exist and from which no captives may return if they have once touched food or drink there, like Proserprine. Other elements of the fairy tale may reflect dimly remembered history, legends of a time when a defeated Bronze Age race shared the land with a conquering one who had overcome them because they knew how to use the "cold iron." Other elements may be symbols for unconscious psychological conflicts, eternal issues which are still active and valid today, as Bruno Bettelheim argues in his Uses of Enchantment; or as Italo Corvino puts it in his Italian Folklore, when he claims that the fairy tale shows the human imagination coming to grips with universal problems:

> . . . the arbitrary division of humans, albeit in essence equal, into kings and poor people; the persecution of the innocent, and their subsequent vindication, which are the terms inherent in every life; love unrecognized when first encountered and then no sooner experienced than lost; the common fate of subjection to spells, or having one's existence predetermined by complex and unknown forces.

Nevertheless, however, even this will not quite do, for the fairy tale does not simply reflect the problems and values of our world. In some ways, Faerie seems much more lax. In traditional folk lore, the fairy people have no objection to stealing and more often than not they are haughty, merciless, fierce, vengeful, and easily insulted or alienated. But they have their standards and their virtues as well as their faults and limitations. They may not be quite our virtues and standards -- you remember the horror of Thomas the minstrel when his fairy mistress bestowed on him the parting gift of always speaking as honestly as the inhabitants of her world did? How, he demands, is he to get along at court, woo a lady, or win the king's favor if he is always obliged to tell the truth? But the fairy people are not only truthful -- they are also generous and grateful, contemptuous of the clutch-fisted, scrupulously honorable. As A. A. Milne wrote in his preface to Hartland's Science of Fairy Tales:

> Even the wicked Ogre who eats babies alive, and by our standards compares ill with a politician, does not dream of going back on his word. ... When a king offers his daughter to the winner of a slippery-hill climbing contest, no lawyers are called in afterwards to challenge the conditions. How blandly, one feels, would a modern Rumpelstilksen announce that his name was really Robinson, and produce naturalization papers to prove it! But in Fairyland honesty was not the best policy, it was the only policy.

As you see, I have no easy explanation for any of the questions or problems I have just been raising. The best advice to anyone who takes the road to Faerie is to mind your manners -- never sleep under an elder tree -- avoid the woods on Midsummer Eve -- and if you find that a lock of your sweetheart's hair is made of sea weed, don't get married.

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Balin Hunting

With squinteyes and forced breath
he hefts twin swords
and lowers a look towards nothing.

Nothing speaks:
"Fool: any man wishing
the divinity of abstraction
blasphemes. Wrath you are not;
Balin you remain."

Stars cloud. He closes
one eye, drops one
sword, empties both
lungs, fills them, speaks:
"Madman, arm yourself."

But Garlon is gone.
And from the black hole within,
twin to the empty valley
echoing feet,
a thought takes shape:

Somewhere there is a land to lay waste,
a king to maim.

Robert Boenig