Thackeray's *The Rose and The Ring*: A Novelist's Fairy Tale

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Abstract
Discusses Thackeray’s literary fairy tale—its technique, moral, and the similarity of its techniques to those used in his novels.

Additional Keywords
Thackeray, William Makepeace. The Rose and the Ring
H
ting published only one fairy tale, William
Makepeace Thackeray is undoubtedly better known
as a Victorian novelist and perhaps best known as the
author of *Vanity Fair* (1848). *The Rose and The Ring*
was not

determined attempt on Thackeray’s part to expand into
the realm of fantasy literature; his “History of Prince Giglio
and Prince Bulbo” grew out of a set of Twelfth Night
characters Thackeray drew for his daughters while living
in Rome. The discarded figures of the King, the Queen, the
Lady, the Lover, the Dandy, and the Captain led him to
concoct an elaborate tale along the lines of a holiday pantomime. The *Rose and The Ring* was published as a
Christmas book in 1854 with 58 illustrations by the
author. It was an immediate success with “children great
and small” and became “one of the best loved literary fairy
tales of the last century” (Stevens, 5).

"Literary" is a key word, for in many ways *The Rose and The Ring* is decidedly not a traditional fairy tale and is quite
obviously the handiwork of Thackeray the novelist. There
are, for example, the allusions to Shakespeare and the
satiric references to contemporaneous authors of whom
Thackeray was not fond.

"Had I the pen of G.P.R. James," [the narrator sighs,
referring to a popular author of historic romances,] "I
would describe Valoroso’s torments in the choicest lan-
guage; in which I would also depict his flashing eye, his
distended nostril — his dressing gown, his pocket-hand-
kchief, and boots. But I need not say I have not the pen
of that novelist; suffice it to say Valoroso was not alone
(TR&TR, 3).

There are also elements of the burlesque, as when King
Valoroso shifts from scolding his daughter in accents most
domestic to soliloquizing in blank verse. (But oh!...ere I
was a king, I needed not this intoxicating draught, once I
detested the hot brandy wine, and quaffed no other fount
but nature’s rill" [3] — this as he sips cognac from his
eggcup.)

Thackeray even parodies the conventions of the fairy
tale itself. Prince Giglio’s suit of fairy armor is "not only
embroidered all over with jewels, and blinding to your
eyes to look at" but also "water-proof, gun-proof, and
sword-proof" (113), the equivalent in armor of a Timex
watch. Faced with such splendor King Padella is "justly
irritated." "If, [says he to Giglio] you ride a fairy horse, and
wear fairy armour, what on earth is the use of my hitting
you? I may as well give myself up as a prisoner at once" (115).

The most conspicuously "literary" touch is Thackeray’s
unavoidable narrator, so familiar to the readers of *Vanity
Fair*. "I hope you do not imagine that there was any
impropriety in the Prince and Princess walking together
in the palace garden and because Giglio kissed Angelica’s
hand in a polite manner" — the narrator interjects chattily
above one illustration. "In the first place they are cousins,
next, the Queen is walking in the garden too (you cannot
see her for she happens to be behind that tree)" (28).

Thackeray’s narrator is constantly at the reader’s elbow
explaining, qualifying, moralizing, addressing himself
first to the children ("I shouldn’t like to sit in that stifling
robe with such a thing as that on my head," he confides,
beneath a picture of King Valoroso) and then to the adults
in his audience ("Thus easily do we deceive ourselves!
Thus do we fancy what we wish is right!" — in reference to
Valoroso’s attempts to justify stealing the Paflagonian
crown from his nephew, Giglio). The narrator is very much
a storyteller who, as C.N. Manlove has noted, "stands
between [the reader] and the story" so that "the tale be-
comes an expression of a particular consciousness" (13).

But the narrator’s highly personal, even chummy, tone
also forces the reader to respond "both to the narrator and
to the characters; and this in turn animates the fiction"
(Ferris, 35). If Thackeray’s narrator puts some distance
between the writer, (and the reader), and the work, he also
draws the reader into the world he is creating and helps
break down "the barrier between fiction and life" (ibid.).

To focus solely on the literary aspects of *The Rose and
The Ring* would be unjust, for it has all the ingredients of a
perfect fairy tale. There is the brave and handsome Giglio,
who defeats his enemies, regains his kingdom and frees
the beautiful Rosalba. There is Blackstick, the requisite
devil goddess, who rewards the good and turns evil-
doers into a variety of inanimate objects. Of course there
are the rose and the ring, magical gifts that bring both
delight and disaster. And finally there is the happy ending
with foes vanquished, lovers united, and rightful order
restored.

But to suggest the *The Rose and The Ring* is simply a
traditional fairy tale with a few literary special effects
thrown in would do it an even greater injustice, for
Thackeray’s story is more complex. As Gordon Ray notes
in his introduction to the MS facsimile edition of *The Rose
and The Ring*, Thackeray’s attitude towards the world of
make-believe was "curiously ambivalent." In *The Rose
and The Ring*, his "two apparently irreconcilable attitudes, of
insistence on reality and delight in romance, exist simul-
Angelica, manage to limit its sphere of influence. But as Thackeray's "web of moral concern" (Manlove, 11), all the ring passes from hand to hand it serves as a sort of though the rose is less important since Bulbo, and later education. As in a traditional fairy tale, everyone gets themselves deserving. what he or she deserves, but here they must first prove which is her true gift. In the same way, although she is calculated to develop the soundness of heart and mind hardship" (86). The fairy's present of "a little misfortune" spoiled by good fortune, and others, as I hope, improved by funny things," she tells Giglio. "I have seen some folk emotional - rather than their material - welfare; she is ungrateful rather than happy. "I know a number of funny things," she tells Giglio. "I have seen some folk spoilt by good fortune, and others, as I hope, improved by hardship" (86). The fairy's present of "a little misfortune" is calculated to develop the soundness of heart and mind which is her true gift. In the same way, although she recognizes Giglio as the rightful monarch Blackstick does not help him do away with his opponents until he has made himself fit to rule by catching up on his neglected education. As in a traditional fairy tale, everyone gets what he or she deserves, but here they must first prove themselves deserving.

The rose and the ring are also very much a part of Thackeray's "web of moral concern" (Manlove, 11), although the rose is less important since Bulbo, and later Angelica, manage to limit its sphere of influence. But as the ring passes from hand to hand it serves as a sort of moral touchstone. With it, Angelica is conceived and insufferable. Gruffanuff is underhanded and conniving. Rosalba, humble and virtuous, finds its magic a curse rather than a blessing. The ring also becomes a moral yardstick for Giglio, who initially falls in love with Rosalba (as he did with Angelica) simply because she wears the ring. Only when he has learned and grown can he love Rosalba for herself. And only then can he understand that the illusion the ring provides is unnecessary where there is true love.

"Rosalba needs no ring, I am sure," says Giglio, with a low bow. "She is beautiful enough, in my eyes, without any enchanted aid." . . . In his eyes she looked just as handsome as before! (TR&TR, 112)

The rose and the ring are left to Bulbo and Angelica, too ugly and too weak to accept each other as they really are and happy only with their illusions. The central problem resolved, the hero and heroine correctly having chosen reality over illusion, the story at an end, Blackstick is free to fly away never to be heard of again.

In writing about the transition from traditional to modern fantasy and Victorian fairy stories in particular, two critics who discuss The Rose and The Ring view it as a work of some significance. According to Stephen Prickett the story marks "an important change in Victorian sensibility" and a change in tone from earlier works. The Rose and The Ring, he suggests, rode the crest of a new wave in fantasy literature: "From the 1850s onwards fantasy is more self-conscious, more free, flexible, and reflexive, inviting the reader to accept, but to think about the nature of its acceptance" (72). C.N. Manlove characterizes The Rose and The Ring as a modern fairy tale, distinguished from a traditional tale by the presence of a consciousness which makes actions reasonable, moral, proportionate and comprehensible; which directly delights in its own creation; which engages in parody or imitation of other literary forms; which makes the reader aware of the personality of the author; which bestows significance on the story... which uses irony; and which throws the reader on his own consciousness (14).

Both critics make points that are well worth considering. There is, however, one additional fact which must be taken into account. That is that much of what Thackeray puts into The Rose and The Ring -- the allusions, the satire, the narrative technique, the humor, the moral structure -- is simply what had been (and would prove) so effective in his other works. Thackeray the teller of fairy stories could not detach himself from Thackeray the novelist, who brought other literary influences to bear on the traditional fairy tale. And rather than proving a problem, this melding of tradition and innovation is certainly what accounts in large measure for the work's popular and critical success.

(Endnotes continued on page 43)
difficult for children. Another reason may be that it is primarily an animal fantasy without the simplicity of, say, *The Wind in the Willows*, or the natural history adult appeal of real animals such as appear in, for example, Henry Williamson’s nature books.

It may also be true to say that it is not much read because de la Mare has slipped into obscurity, having been dismissed by Modernist critics as an out-dated Georgian Romantic, and by Leavis and his school in particular as an "escapist" poet with nothing to say to our modern world. In respect of that "escapist" label, it is relevant to note Tolkien’s protest in 1938, which might well stand as a defence of de la Mare:

> I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used: . . . In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical. . . . in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds (TL 53-4).

Tolkien recognizes that fantasy is important to man and is relevant to living and that it can be used to put "imaginatively starved modern man back once again into awed and reverent contact with a living universe." De la Mare, too, finds that men are becoming estranged from their true place in nature and are often so throned in with material worries, and immortal anxieties, and a stodgy heredity, and the deadly environment of too much money, or of the longing for more, or of the absence of any, that most of their joy and beauty must come at second hand and be translated for them out of experience by an eye that sees, an ear that hears. . . .

Are not all writers of fantasy trying to effect such a translation as they entice their readers into their own "secondary" worlds of make-believe and magic?

*A Song of Enchantment I sang me there,*
*In a green – green wood, by waters fair,*
*Just as the words came up to me*
*I sang it under the wild wood tree.*

(CT 186)

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**Endnotes**

6. "Feodor Sologub," *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), 24 June 1915:212; and Introduction to Animal Stories chosen, arranged, and in some part rewritten by Walter de la Mare (London: Faber, 1939) xxxiii.

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**Thackery’s The Rose and The Ring continued from page 38**

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**Endnotes**

1. Gordon Ray points out the enormous popularity of Christmas pantomimes in Thackeray’s day, noting that "the pantomime came to be divided into two distinct parts," an opening with material taken from "nursery tales, familiar dramas" or history, and a concluding Harlequinade employing stock characters from the Commedia dell’ Arte (xiii). *The Rose and The Ring*, Ray suggests, "is in fact the ‘speaking opening’ of an early Victorian pantomime, infinitely refined and elaborated" (xx).  
2. The "author" of *The Rose and The Ring* was M.A. (Michael Angelo) Titmarsh, a name under which Thackeray also authored other Christmas stories. Thackeray not only did the drawings for his fairy tale; he also had a hand in the woodcuts, although his skill with wood nowhere neared his talents with pencil and paints.  
3. In a series of parodies originally written for *Punch* (1847-8) and later published as Novels by Eminent Hands, Thackeray satirizes the work of G.P.R. James in a short piece entitled "Barbazzure."  
4. Thackeray’s narrator is considered rather forward even in an age when intrusive narrators were commonplace. As Ina Ferris has noted, ‘Thackeray’s narrator is distinguished [from narrators employed by other Victorian authors such as Dickens, Trollope and Eliot] by his conversational, personal tone’ (34).  
5. Thackeray was, after all, the author whose usual literary "credo" was that "the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality" (Ray, XII). But he also delighted in pantomimes containing "the sparkling sugar of benevolence, the plums of fancy, the sweetmeats of fun, the figs of - well, the figs of fairy fiction" all popped into "the seething cauldron of imagination" (Stevens, 8).  
6. As C.N. Manlove has suggested, Blackstick’s concern "is in contrast to traditional fairy tales, where the means by which the hero becomes a king and not in his fitness to govern" (11).

**Works Cited**


