


Vaz da Silva, Francisco. *The Meanings of Enchantment. Wondertale Symbolism Revisited. The Kalevala Society, 2023. ISBN: 978-952-9534-05-0. 218 pp.*

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Francisco Vaz da Silva brings us *The meanings of Enchantment. Wondertale Symbolism Revisited*, an essay where he aims to shed additional light on symbolism, metaphors, patterns and, overall, the meaning behind most fairy tales or, as Vaz da Silva renames them, “wondertales”. The reason for this new concept rises from the need to refer solely to old tales, as the term has somewhat lost its original meaning and now encompasses any fantasy story depicting a wonderland. The book is broken down into a prologue, an introduction and three parts: the first one including chapters one to three, the second one, chapters four to six and the last part serving as a one-chapter conclusion that wraps everything up and ties several loose ends.

In the book’s introduction the author paves the way for the reader by defining wondertale, its scope and the scientific approach he takes towards myths, symbols and metaphors insofar as they should be studied within the original tales, as well as by comparing them with other tales, regardless of their striking similarities or apparent differences. He then proceeds to detail all former approaches to myth and symbolism in fairy tales– and state his agreement and criticism towards earlier methodologies, not without giving credit where it is due. Vaz da Silva’s main point of view stems from his disagreement with some contemporary critics, who fail to recognise the transformation within the tradition where modern tales belong. These critics address symbolism and meaning behind wondertales by focusing mostly on retellings of tales and more contemporary translations, without acknowledging the ambiguous symbolic codes of older tales. This way, he makes an analogy with an echo chamber, where some modern critics rely on contemporary ethics to indict the tales and, therefore, cannot comprehend the symbolism behind stories that have been retold in a myriad ways across continents and time and have managed to linger on until today.

Part 1, Chapter 1 “First Look: Dragons, Maidens, and Scholars” introduces the reader into the first type of tale presented in the essay and becomes the stepping stone on which the author starts dissecting his methodology and theoretical approach. He focuses on the story’s specific symbols and tries to match them to several others from tales across the globe. In particular, the notion discussed relates to death and rebirth, as well as sleep or slumber and awakening –all in dragon tales, as first noticed by Propp– as cues to transition between different states, just like an initiation rite. This is portrayed by the idea of dragons either swallowing or abducting princesses who then wait on their beds or asleep for their heroes to come rescue them. As shown in multiple wondertales, these symbols mean to depict the transition between childhood and adulthood (through puberty) of maidens and young men alike. According to Propp and stated by Vaz da Silva, there are close to one hundred and fifty motifs in Russian wondertales alone with regards to this notion of death and rebirth. From old stories up to the Brothers Grimm’s relatively recent tales, most of them contrast beauty and horror to indeed match the idea of death and renewal; of death –or its symbolic counterpart–being a new and truer beginning upon which the character proceeds to evolve.

In Chapter 2 “Morphology and Ideology: Propp Revisited”, the author addresses four very similar tales whose protagonists are stepmothers and stepdaughters, part of the large corpus of tales that Propp had previously analysed and from which he inferred a plot model: most main characters start off as lacking something –or at the gates of a transformation– and end up receiving a reward for accomplishing the difficult tasks imposed onto them. This –Propp breaks down– is often tackled by the theme of the hero leaving home, then obtaining a magical agent or performing well at tests, and, optionally, solving a hard task or fighting a difficult battle against a dragon (male-predominant). This pattern is the path of the hero, according to Propp. Holbek, on the other hand –as specified by Vaz da Silva–, believes the tale must include the theme

of marriage to be considered *complete*; otherwise, it is plainly a children tale. However, both authors, in Vaz da Silva's opinion, portray an androcentric bias in their model. Vaz da Silva suggests that "feminine transformations sit at the core of wondertales" (p.61). He then proceeds to explain this by addressing one of the key symbols in this essay: wondertale girls are transformed by means of a gift, a quest or a spell, symbolising the coming of age, the beginning of the feminine fertile cycle. Two sides of the same coin: darkness and light, death and rebirth, slumber and awakening, hiding and resurfacing; they all show a clear connection to the moon gift of fertility –the menarche–, marking the inevitability of growing up and embracing the new marital social status.

Chapter 3 "Variations and Meanings: Snake Idylls" focuses on delving slightly deeper into wondertale symbolism, showcasing the relationship between maidens and snakes, as well as the similarities between snakes and dragons, the latter being an amplification of the former. The author points out the remarkable stability of tales across time, considering that they evolved via oral tradition despite the fallibility of human memory. It is then introduced the concept of allomotifs –famously proposed by Dundes– to "unlock the secrets of symbolism in folklore, and moreover unlock them in a way that is replicable" (p.72). Even if a symbol becomes a taboo later in history, it will be substituted by another one whose meaning will most likely carry the same weight. Vaz da Silva's saying in this matter is that allomotifs convey metaphors in folklore and they should be studied to reveal patterns in wondertales. Several symbols are worth detailing in this chapter stemming from snake-helper and dragon-slaying tales. First, the connection between snakes/dragons as caretakers during puberty and protectors of a maiden's chastity, with the snakes growing alongside the maiden into, eventually, a dragon-like creature in some tales. Secondly, symbolic connections between wine and blood, flowers in bloom and women's puberty or containers and maidens' fragile virginity, as well as gold and maidens' fertility –the dragons being traditionally gold hoarders– but, perhaps most importantly, the obvious connection between the cyclical nature of snakes shedding their skin with the moon cycles and women's menstruation, symbolising rejuvenation, discarding the old and welcoming rebirth and maturity. The author points out a very relevant and cohesive metaphor in this chapter: the bond between the coming-of-age girl and the snake companion shall only be severed willingly by the girl upon marriage with the most suitable man rather than forcefully by someone else.

Chapter 4 "Wondertale as Metaphor: Moon Lovers" seeks to identify and connect common symbols and derive their inherent meaning. Vaz da Silva treads on the metaphorical realm in this chapter by establishing a clear relationship between the monsters and the maidens –both are one and the same–, and also implying that girls become poisonous due to menarche, drawing symbolical powers from the moon –reinforcing the natural enchantment of pubertal girls. The girl's blood is also his kin's, and the father symbolises the protector or even the guardian monster: in many tales, he offers his daughter the snake and also cries out for the

dragon-slaying quest in order to 'force' his daughter to mature. These wondertale quests often make use of ogres, trolls, demons, crones, witches and magicians who, like dragons and snakes –as agents of the moon– signify the enchantment itself. What comes next is ending the enchantment, a purpose reserved to the male suitor or often a helper, who must fight her dragon, kill the ogre, trick the witch or solve the riddle –among other themes– in order to break the spell. The riddle is the enchantment. The riddle is the woman herself. This act of defloration is but a leitmotiv present across time and tales; it signifies sexual conquest, not devoid of danger, as these men often get injured, poisoned or beheaded. Vaz da Silva's point in this chapter is that "wondertales as a genre are inherently metaphorical" (p.104), for the characters part on a journey through space and time to fight off a time-frozen enchantment; in conclusion, a journey of maturity.

In Chapter 5 "Enchantment as Fate: Crones and Maidens", the author continues to introduce symbols and metaphors through new stories, particularly those of crones, witches, fairies and maidens. Fruits and herbs are associated with feminine fluxes, towers and seclusion become the enchantment, and, lastly, the sun penetrating the tower, the man and his sword –a phallic symbol– become the means to conquer chaste girls. The notion of fate is ever-present in this chapter –for the concept of a fairy derives from it, etymologically–, as the girl is fated to start bleeding and cycling with the moon. As the author points out: "in pubertal seclusions between heaven and earth, the lunar pattern of eternal regeneration prevails" (p.119) and their fate is to eventually welcome maturity. It is also remarked that stories make use of prime numerical patterns: ternary patterns for wondertales' number of acts –as in thesis, antithesis and synthesis–, number of fairies and spells or the very pattern of menarche, defloration and ulterior childbirth; number 7 –dragon heads, dwarves, tasks– or 13 (moon cycles per year). Also worth mentioning is the freudian symbolic upward displacement, where obsessing with the neck, freeing a victim of choking –just like expelling the snake or killing the dragon– are all allomotifs for breaking the spell: all sexual metaphors symbolising defloration. Vaz da Silva ends the chapter by addressing how Perrault and Brothers Grimm started adapting tales to fit the new aristocratic audiences: rape gave way to euphemism, to hinting through dreams and eventually to simple kisses. The stories have evolved over time to become palatable and adapting to changes in cultural norms.

Chapter 6 "Implied Meanings: Enchantment Metaphors" brings together the dragon-slayer and tower enchantment wondertales by studying non-European folklore as well. The author keeps finding stable motifs in oral tradition commonly absent from literary texts; hence he surmises that written texts are not necessarily the source of oral tradition, a remark he proposed earlier in this essay. These motifs are connected through new and recurrent symbols as well, such as eating food symbolising sex, the allusion to blood and family in North African tales –suggesting perhaps incestuous relationships– and the connection between blood and fire –while the former flows, the latter is extinguished. Fire (like the sun, previously) is of great importance in plenty

of stories: rekindling the fire transposes to rape or sexual attraction and ends the familiar enchantment. Vaz da Silva then proceeds to link fire to ashes – Cinderella variations come into play– where the fire needs to be relit like an unwedded girl needs to be sexually warmed.

In “Chapter 7 Conclusion: A Transformational Field” Vaz da Silva recapitulates bringing forth that contemporary ethics hamper our insight into wondertales; obviously tales evolve to adapt to new audiences and themes vary, but the symbolic architecture remains. He then acknowledges Angela Carter’s retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* –Carter being a self-proclaimed feminist– as a creative way to invert the theme present in the story and portraying

empowered women in tales, all the while conveying similar ideas and preserving wondertale traits. This retelling matches elegantly with the strong female characters present in Icelandic tales of *Saga of the Volsungs*, appreciating the marriage between innovation and tradition in Carter’s works.

Concluding, Vaz da Silva revisits and analyses tradition in a scientific manner, connecting symbols and inferring meanings across multiple cultures looking for common ground, as imagery in wondertales convey meaning the same way metaphors do in regular communication. He cleverly points out that, in order to fully unravel wondertale mysteries, scholars need to delve ever so deeper in the wondrous abyss of traditional folklore.

