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A New Book on Wondertale Symbolism

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Francisco Vaz da Silva, *The Meanings of Enchantment. Wondertale Symbolism Revisited*, (*Folklore Fellows' Communications* 326), Helsinki: The Kalevala Society, 2023, 218 p., ISBN 978-952-9534-05-0

The roots of international folklore research lie primarily in the study of folktales. So much has been written about these narratives and from so many different angles that it seems difficult to say something new, yet this new book *The Meanings of Enchantment. Wondertale Symbolism Revisited* published as volume 326 in the *Folklore Fellows' Communications* series, shows that tales are an inexhaustible source for research.

Francisco Vaz da Silva, a Portuguese scholar and the author of this book, is well known as a researcher of folktales. Previously, he published a monograph (Vaz da Silva 2002) and numerous articles on them. Therefore, before reading this book, I had a general idea of what to expect in this study and wondered if these expectations were to be fulfilled. My guess was correct: this is yet another book by the renowned folklore researcher about the symbolic meanings of mythical images in tales.

The book has a fascinating cover featuring the painting *Study for a Bookplate with St George Rescuing a Maiden from a Dragon* by the Austrian artist Franz von Bayros. The picture is of a girl looking up at us, with a dragon licking her neck. Surprisingly, these two personages look like a couple in love. In the background,

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we see Saint George, ready to save the girl. But is he really a saviour? For F. Vaz da Silva, the saint is just a third person in this intriguing relationship: “The dragon slayer, purported rescuer of abducted virgins, crashes into the maiden’s idyll with her dragon. The savior is, in fact, an intruder” (p. 9). Sounds unconvincing? Still, this is the main argument of F. Vaz da Silva’s book. Thus, I was curious how this paradoxical idea is realised.

Already in the introduction the author confirms that he is continuing his research on tales and this book is the result of many years of long and dedicated work. This study covers and summarises what the researcher has analysed and searched for in his many scholarly publications. The subtitle of the book, *Wondertale Symbolism Revisited*, informs that the author will revise older research ideas. So, let us look at the new, intriguing discoveries the scholar has made that might surprise us.

The book consists of a prologue, an introduction, and three main parts: “The Basics”, “The Core”, and “The Lessons”. These parts are further subdivided into seven smaller chapters. F. Vaz da Silva’s main research guides are Claude Lévi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp, and Sigmund Freud, but he also actively polemicises with such scholars as Bengt Holbek, Alan Dundes, Isabel Cardigos, Christina Bacchilega, and others, who have already become known as key figures of folklore studies.

In the introduction, the author asks the central question: do we really know fairy tales well? We are familiar with them more as childhood stories, but the mythical images they capture have deeper meanings. At the same time, the author points out that fairy tales intended for a wider audience have been significantly sanitised, and many compilers of fairy tale collections had done that. Therefore, to uncover the old meanings of the tales, scholars have to rely on their oral versions.

Choosing the right terms is important for each research work. The term “fairy tale” that scholars like to use is somewhat complicated, because they prefer it when referring to the tales of magic. However, this term also encompasses the literary fairy tales composed or adapted by Charles Perrault, Giambattista Basile, and the Brothers Grimm, and is therefore often misleading. The confusion over this concept is due to its complex history, going several centuries back. The origin of “fairy tale” can be traced back to France of the second half of the seventeenth century, where Countess Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy and other wealthy and educated women used to create, recreate, and tell tales. Fairies were the main figures in these tales, and that was why such stories were named after them. This was part of the literary movement that aimed to turn oral tales into elegant *contes de fées*, hence the term “fairy tales”. Over the years, stories depicting magical events came to be known as fairy tales. However, the term is rather vague: “For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form with easily identified characteristics, but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of

other forms may be grouped” (Haase 2008: 322). F. Vaz da Silva was facing the same problem and argued that “nowadays the term encompasses almost any story featuring a wonderland” (p. 22). He therefore chooses the term “wondertales” to refer to “the overall field of stories – both oral and literary, in their multiple interactions – that keep the wondrous aspects in sight” (Ibid.).

The study introduces another important term, mythism, which is defined as a certain level of metaphorical thinking that is very popular in tales. The author states “that there is no fundamental discontinuity between the spontaneous metaphorical thinking conveyed in wondertales and in so-called myths”; however, he distinguishes certain differences: tales and myths use the same mythical information but interpret it in different ways. For example, in myths, the slaying of the dragon is associated with cosmogony, while in wondertales, it is associated with the rescue of the bride (p. 24–25). In short, according to the scholar, the *pensée sauvage*, i. e., wild thought, is found in wondertales. This shows that wondertales are also an important source of knowledge about mythological reality.

The author’s main point, which he emphasises throughout the book, is that the mythic nature of wondertales is revealed through the prism of puberty and sexual initiation. These images are hidden under the language of metaphors in the tales (represented by the phases of dying and being reborn), and as it turns out later, some of the metaphors, are widespread across the cultures. The search for such metaphors and their decoding forms the basis of this research work, which the author defines as mental ethnography of wondertales.

The object of the study is girls and their intimate powers. For this research, the author chose both popular, widely known wondertales assigned to the types of tales of magic (for example ATU 300, 310, 410, 451, 480, 510A, 709, etc.) and rarer, local tale types. Such a wide sample of material also serves as an interpretative context. He associates the powers of the girls with the “dark mythology”. The girls fall under the influence of the moon and are therefore surrounded by chthonic creatures: dangerous witches, dragons, snakes, and werewolves. In the author’s view, girls in wondertales appear as dangerous creatures that express threat to men. The heroes must engage helpers to neutralise the girls’ magical powers. Reading such interpretations raises certain questions. Is it possible that this image of dangerous women was created by men who valued women from a patriarchal perspective? Or, on the contrary, is this image a reflection of the old matricentric European culture as seen from the masculine point of view?

Nevertheless, it is essential that the author turns his attention to the traditional tales, which obviously reflect an archaic mentality. He therefore points out that a traditional storytelling is defined as the creative use of symbolic equivalents to compose new versions of each tale. This is why tales are so stable, even though no

two versions are alike (p. 39). Thus, it is the totality of tales that makes it possible to identify the archaic mentality of the people who tell such stories.

In the first part of the book, “The Basics”, the author chooses a specific methodological instrument for his research: the specific unit called “allomotif” proposed by Alain Dundes (2007: 319–324). The allomotifs are described as motifs which can replace one another in different versions of tales. This means that different people can tell the same story with varying motifs, so that the meaning of competing motifs should become clear when comparing them. It is expected that in this way the meanings of the metaphors in the tales can be clarified, which would help to reveal the patterns and regional traditions of the meaning of certain tales. Besides, the use of allomotifs helps to ingeniously relate motifs that seem to have no connection with each other. To show that stable metaphorical patterns can be found in diverse types of tales and in different regional traditions, the author compares similar tales from distant regions of Europe.

Particular attention is paid to the relationship between girls and dragons / snakes (p. 75–77). The image of the dragon abducting girls is so commonplace that it seems unquestionable: it is a confrontation between an evil monster and a helpless girl. However, as F. Vaz da Silva points out, there is a deeper meaning to this image. These tales express a common basic plot: a girl is drawn into a secret relationship with a snake/dragon, then, afterwards she is freed from the spell and gets married. It is interesting that although the Nordic stories and the Italian version come from quite different times and places, they share the similar idea that marriage is about breaking the bond between the pubescent girl and her snake. Thus, in a veiled metaphorical sense, the author equates the girl’s relationship with a snake with the process of her puberty. He also describes the widespread metaphorical link between virgins and broken vessels. In traditional European societies, the symbolic equivalence between a girl’s virginity and an unbroken jar was obvious. If such imagery is universal, it should be repeated in other cultures. In this case, I can find the Lithuanian equivalents of this symbolic idea, which are detected in certain customs. For example, at a Lithuanian wedding, the breaking of an earthenware vessel is treated as a metaphor of defloration (Stundžienė 2004: 24).

F. Vaz da Silva provides other interesting insights. He argues that the relationship between dragons and girls is active during the puberty phase, usually between menarche and defloration, while the woman’s relationship with the serpent/dragon breaks down as she enters the marital sphere (p. 81). He decodes such metaphors in the motifs of girls abducted by dragons and rescued by young men.

It is not surprising that girls’ maturity is also associated with flowers (p. 82–85). In many cultures, girls and their youth are equated with blossoming flowers, thus emphasising the fragility and transience of this period. It is possible that this image

independently migrated to the tales of various nations. In fact, the opening episode of the Lithuanian tale of magic about the dragons that kidnap girls (ATU 301D*) tells how a girl, who has been locked up for a long time, is let out after much pleading. There she picks flowers, then a dragon descends and carries her away (LPTStP 1 79). The question may arise whether this similarity between the tales of distant nations is coincidental. Specifically, the author demonstrates that such images are found in different cultures and are based on certain regular patterns.

In the second part of the book, “The Core”, the author further develops the theme of the relationship between girls and dragons. Here he sees an analogy between slaying the dragon and sexually assessing the bride. F. Vaz da Silva presupposes that there is a secret connection between maturing girls and snakes / dragons: a snake can give feminine powers, and a snake / dragon can inhabit the bride. That is why snake-protected and dragon-possessed girls may have snake properties. Indeed, this insight would explain why in the tales of various nations, there is a motif of the girl, who was freed from the dragon’s spell, is cut open, dismembered, and her body (abdomen) is washed. For example, in the Lithuanian version of the tale of magic ATU 306, various slugs and amphibians (a snake, lizards, toads, frogs, worms) are removed from the girl’s body (LPTStP 1: 611–612).

The analysis reveals another interesting fact: in tales, sexual relations and riddling can exist in parallel, which points to their equivalence. Again, material from other folklore genres bears witness to such a connection. For instance, riddles are a popular feature in Lithuanian wedding songs. Weddings were seen as an important initiatory moment in the transition from youth to adulthood. It has been observed that riddles were used to test the maturity of the newlyweds and their readiness for marriage. They were used to test the arriving flock of the bridegroom. It seems, therefore, that wedding songs with riddles represent reflections on such ritual examination (Kensminienė 2005: 75).

An important aspect of this book is that the author compares the published versions of tales with the manuscript variants written down from the oral tradition. This helps to identify how the tales were edited in preparation for publication. It turns out that Ch. Perrault eliminated some of the sex motifs in the tales, while the Brothers Grimm toned down many of the explicit sexual references. F. Vaz da Silva rightly points out that the time of writing a tale text is not an important reference point (p. 132). They have many variants and none of them is more authoritative than others. Hence, we can only talk about certain phenomena depicted in tales by comparing several versions.

One of the main ideas conveyed by the author is that intimate actions depicted in the tales are hidden under symbolic images. For example, sexual relations and defloration are encrypted by the removal of an apple or a grape from a girl’s throat,

by removal of a thorn / shard from her finger, or by the slaying of a dragon (p. 137–138). Certain tale images and some linguistic data help to detect a well-trodden symbolic equivalence between cats and feminine genitals (p. 166).

Using the categories of mythical thinking, we can re-evaluate some of the wondertale imagery. For instance, F. Vaz da Silva thinks, that a wondertale about a man seeking fire ends with the bride being found for an important reason (p. 148). In the author's view, this is because the fire is the equivalent of blood. And blood is mostly associated with girls (their menstruations or defloration). So, in explaining the symbolic meaning of objects, the author has permanently to guide the reader towards new symbols or to come back to the previously discussed, because everything is connected and forms a rather coherent kaleidoscope of images.

“The Lessons”, the third part of the book, summarises the ideas presented and considers general changes in the genre of the wondertale. The author interprets tale images on two – physiologic and a cosmic – levels (p. 175). In this way, he sees the connection between enchantment and the lunar sphere (associated with blood, darkness, and snakes / dragons) and the connection between disenchantment and the solar realm (associated with fire, light, and wedding). Thus, we can see that wondertale images are not fragmented narratives but, rather, form a coherent, mythologically defined system. In other words, the reader is introduced to the vast layers of mythology implicit in tales. The tale does not appear as a flat, straightforward work but rather as a multi-dimensional projection, the depth of which can be discerned by analysing a certain amount of the tales that hide the same symbolism. This shows that wondertales are not just works of entertainment but that they contain the fundamental reflections of our mentality and worldview. Therefore, mapping of the symbolic patterns of these tales would help us grasp the unselfconscious mythical thinking that manifests itself in metaphors in life. Interestingly, once such patterns of thinking have been identified, modern fairy tales can also be explored with reference to them. This purports the idea that such structures of our mind are not dependent on time, and such patterns can be used to analyse stories from different epochs. To sum up, this book is not a simple analysis of wondertales but a whole study of the changes and stability in people's mentality.

I would like to conclude this review by noting that reading this book was very interesting but at the same time quite challenging, for a couple of reasons. When writing about metaphorical images and their interconnections, the author makes numerous references to other chapters in the book, which is not very convenient for the reader who is forced to keep returning to a previously read text. Such an inconvenience would be easy to rectify. In my opinion, the author's use of the term “mental maps” begs for a visual representation of mythical images and their interconnections. A graphical representation of the objects in question and

their interrelationships would reveal more clearly the depth and beauty of the metaphorical language.

Finally, I would like to conclude by once again welcoming Francisco Vaz da Silva's valuable book on tales. It is surprising and fascinating to discover the scholar's insights and interpretations of the meanings of the symbols inherent in tales. Reading this book felt like a long adventurous journey through various cultures and enigmatic mythical images. To the readers of this book, I also wish the pleasant experience of travelling through the world of symbols and metaphors of tales.

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