

Tales of the Folk: A Retracing of Roots and

Origins

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Research into a scientific or philosophic discipline hinges upon a thorough investigation of its origins: the origins of science, the onset of philosophy, the beginnings of mankind, the ground zero of evolution. Likewise, on analyzing literature, a journey back to the residual origins of literary history needs to be effected. This paper is a brief examination of the origins of literary folklore with a focus on the significance and value of folktales on an individual as well as collective level. Initially, I will discuss the significance of the element of orality in the emergence and development of folktales and I will historically trace the development of the field of folklore. As a specimen, I will briefly compare and contrast the development and the thematic concerns of Celtic and Southern folklore traditions. Next, through a psychoanalytic perspective, I wish to emphasize the use of folktales both on an individual and on a collective/communal level. My intention is twofold. First, I will argue that, on an individual level, folktales have invariably constituted a sublimation mechanism of individual traumas, unconscious repressed desires and fears through art. Secondly, I will suggest that folktales foster the development of group identities and reinforce a sense of co-belonging that is primarily the outcome of the use of dichotomies, namely hero-villain, self-other.

Like the classical fairy tales, folktales derive from the oral tradition. Passed down from generation to generation through the story-teller's narrations, folktales have invariably constituted an intricate chain of transmitting, communicating and sharing around the homely hearth. As Jack Zipes remarks, folktales "were first told by gifted tellers and were based on rituals intended to endow meaning to the daily lives of members of a tribe" (Fairy Tale as Myth¹⁰). In this way, individuals were bound to the group, and the

notion of communal bonding was reinforced through commonly shared oral folk history. Acting upon the pattern of sender-receiver, the moral message conveyed within the tales embroidered transparent threads of reciprocity among the members of a family or an extended community. Tales therefore were under constant flux and modification, for as they were “[t]old in person, directly, fact to face, they were altered as the beliefs and behaviors of the members of a particular group changed” (Zipes, Fairy Tale as Myth, 10).

Much like a living breathing organism, folktales evolved along the route of their mouth-to-mouth transmission. Alterations within a community, change of living conditions or age inevitably lead to various folktale adaptations which is a norm in all oral traditions. Evaluations and re-evaluations of motifs, plots, incidents and characters are the prerequisite of orality. Zipes asserts that “everyone participated in one way or the other (as teller or listener) in the oral tradition. Everyone was exposed to some kind of storytelling, and nobody can claim ‘true authorship.’” (“Cross-Cultural Connections” 851) Devoid of a true origin, folktales are crowned as a distinctive literature field because of their unclaimed origins. Instead, significance lays to the tales’ interactive function and their interweaving role. In Henry Glassie’s words,

[F]olk and lore link people and expression in a functional circle. Epic and nation, myth and society, custom and community - all conjoin communications and groups. The group exists because its members create communications that call it together and bring it to order. Communications exist because people acting together, telling tales at the hearth... develop significant forms that function at once as signs of identity and forces for cohesion. (400)

Through the element of inter-communication, folktales express both individual and public concerns. Constituting a common point of reference, folktales establish a sort of an extended kinship system. Historically,

ethnographically and anthropologically, they serve as the backbone of folk history. Via the oral carrier, folktales enforce a bifocal etiological relation between communication and the group. In simple words, communication establishes group relationships and its distinctive identity, and, at the same time, the ethnic group or community sustains and develops communication through the transmission of tales.

*Formerly known as “popular antiquities,” the study of folklore surfaced as a wholesome field of interest through the work and effort of English and German philologists. It was not until 1846 when William John Thoms – an English antiquary – coined the word “folk-lore” to refer to the lifestyle of the lower classes (Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* 1). Naturally much controversy envelops the issue of the definition of folklore. Debate concerns the elements which constitute folklore and these which do not, both with reference to archaic and modern tales. As Jan Brunvard discusses, “folklore may be defined as those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary example, as well as the processes of traditional performance and communication.” (9) Emphasis then, seems to lie upon the notions of “tradition” and “group” as folklore comes to endow a sense of group-identity by means of traditionally sustained and transmitted performances or practices.¹ Likewise Roger Abrahams seems to agree that “[a]t first glance, ‘folklore’ seems to mean the wisdom or knowledge of a small, tradition-oriented group.” (17) Consequently, the oral performance of a group’s practices is undoubtedly prioritized as the core element of the all-embracing notion of Tradition.*

*Vladimir Propp is considered to be one of the most important folklorists of all time, as his work contributed to the production of a general morphological map of all folktales. Although Propp’s work mostly derived from the study of the morphological elements of Russian and generally Indo-European folktales and fairy tales, cultural exchange between nations and continents testify to the elementary nature of the Proppian motifs (*Morphology of the Folktale**

1 Likewise, Roger Abrahams seems to agree that “[a]t first glance, ‘folklore’ seems to mean the wisdom or knowledge of a small, tradition-oriented group” (17) and similarly Richard Bauman in “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore” stresses the significance of folklore as a group phenomenon, marker of a distinctive identity, in close affinity with oral tradition and transmission. In his own words, folklore “is the product through creation or re – creation of the whole group and its forebears, and an expression of their common character. It is spoken of in terms of traditions” (33).

xiii). By studying Vladimir Propp's morphology taxonomy and the functions of the folktales' dramatis personae, one can reach the assumption that the hero's "peripety" as well as the demands, tasks and difficulties posed to the hero are a consequence of parental or maternal intervention. The loss of a family member, the interdictions set to the hero, inner struggle, the task of rescuing and the element of wedding are among the key functions that structure a tale's entire action and relate to the exaggeration of the hero's virility.

Propp's structural analysis of the folktale has influenced many scholars. Jan De Vries and Joseph Campbell are among those who embrace the circular journey of the hero, based upon the pattern of birth-quest-struggle-victory-return. Campbell states that the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), while others give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented at the hero's sexual union with the goddess (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft). The final work is that of the return. Accordingly, Jan De Vries puts forward an index of motifs similar to Propp's, stating that the pattern of heroic life "applies to the contents of myth as well as of fairy-tale, so that it is possible to draw up a scheme or pattern, to which myth, heroic legend, and fairy-tale conform in broad and general outline." (210)

As one of the oldest folklore types, Celtic folktales and myths bear one of the strongest and most distinguished oral descents throughout Europe. Composed by bards and passed down from generation to generation, Celtic tales have been orally preserved from the eighth to the eleventh century AD and were not sooner recorded until the twelfth century AD by ecclesiastical scholars. The most prolific source of knowledge concerning Celtic mythology remains the Mabinogion. Composed of four branches of tales stemming from Celtic lore, the Mabinogion is the outcome of a long historical and anthropological route of communal interaction and fermentation. Although fragments of the tales can be found in stories dating back to 1000, the Mabinogion was translated from Welsh only in 1849 by Lady Charlotte Guest who also coined the title. The title derived from the Welsh word "mab" signifying "boy" and the translator concluded that "mabinogion" means "stories for children" (White 157). Because folklore harks back to primitive times and it was mostly neglected as insignificant, little has been preserved intact from Celtic folklore. In fact, the first seeds of interest towards the study of folklore emerged in the early nineteenth century.

Thomas Crofton Croker belongs to the pioneering group of British folklorists and his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* in 1825 constitutes, according to Richard Dorson, the “first intentional field collection to be made in Great Britain.” (“The First Group of British Folklorists” 1) Depicting the lifestyle of Irish peasantry, its demonic tales and their native parole, Croker crossed the border from the mere observation of the common, the lowly and the everyday to the scholarly investigation and analysis of their tales. By having turned to the Irish landscape laden with superstitions, legends and mysteries, Croker highlighted one of the richest British folklore traditions – the Gaelic tradition. Crowned as a pioneering figure in the field of folklore research, Thomas Croker not merely records the lore of the Irish folk but most significantly he perceives, identifies and foregrounds common folklore motifs namely “the heroic formula of the popular champion who periodically returns to his people.” (Dorson, “The First Group of British Folklorists” 3) Additionally, John Francis Campbell began collecting folklore in Gaelic-speaking territories as early as 1860, while Dorson also acknowledges the work of a team of English folklorists distinguishing Sir John Rhys “the Celtic folklore authority” as well as Alfred Nutt who “produced solid Celtic studies.” (“The Great Team of English Folklorists” 3) Contrasting to the long history of Celtic heritage, American folklore is the product of a relatively short span of evolution as well as the outcome of a new nation’s effort to establish a separate and distinctive cultural and political identity detached from the British influence. Not surprisingly thus, as Richard Dorson remarks, “the story of American folklore coincides with the beginning of American history, that is, with the period of discovery, exploration and colonization.” (“A Historical Theory for American Folklore” 327) The Old World immigrants’ relocation into a new natural environment led to the development of new legends of heroism and catastrophe. Like Old World folktales, Southern folktales have invariably born a close relationship to the land which shaped and conditioned a new sense of native regionalism. The New World’s fecundity as well as the dynamic interactions between immigrants and native populations gave birth to the first instances of a new nation’s folk history.

Carrying within them the traditions, customs and tales of the Old World, settlers of the American South filtered their Old World pride through the Southern landscape to create a new strand of folklore. Many of the new settlers came from the Scottish, Irish and Welsh stock and “certainly the Celtic influence was a most salient feature of antebellum Southern life” (Wyatt-Brown 38). According to Dorson, “[w]hat we may call American

folklore resulted from the grafting of Old World beliefs onto the New World environment, and the generation of new folk fancies within old forms” (American Folklore 8). Narrative features like male heroism, the supernatural, or superstition inevitably passed from Celtic recesses down to the settlers of the New World and were subsequently adapted and incorporated within the new lore fit to serve the new living conditions and the new continent’s mentality.

Francis James Child and Cecil Sharp are considered to be pioneers in the domain of American folklore. As Dorson highlights in Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies, Sharp and Child’s research in the 1870’s and 1880’s resulted in the categorization of 305 ballad types of English and Scottish provenance still sung in southern Appalachian that show obvious signs of the Middle Ages, as “[t]heir archaic language and [their] chivalric themes [bespeak] the past” (42). The past therefore surfaces as a central theme in southern folklore harking back to roots and origins in contrast to the newly established southern history. Gradually, in the U.S.A. legend cycles have developed about “the Revolution, the Civil War (particularly in the South), the Indian wars, and the settlement of the frontier” (Brunvard 179)¹ historicizing American culture and binding irremediably once more land and lore.

On an individual level, folktales sublimate unconscious fears, desires and traumas through art. Through a psychoanalytic perspective, folktales and fairy tales involve a series of projections and identifications that can symbolically channel repressed predicaments. As Alan Dundes notes “[a]mong its functions, folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way.” (36) For instance, folktales use the motif of simplicity and naiveté in order to release the tension and pressure that an individual’s progression into adulthood guarantees. Oedipal dramas are rendered harmless by means of their stereotyped presentation in plots, events and childlike characters. As Dundes puts it, folktales “meet the psychological needs of individuals,” for the tales’ function of “projection provides a means of translating inner thoughts into outer expression.” (61) In fact, tales reflect standard behavioral patterns that have become archetypal. Manipulating individual psychological complexes

1 Richard Dorson in his essay “A Historical Theory for American Folklore” agrees as to the creation of historical American folklore themes stating that “[i]n these great themes – colonization, the Revolution, the westward movement, slavery, the Civil War, immigration, and industrialization – can be found the pulse of the American historical experience” (336).

and unconscious compulsive reactions, folktales bridge the gap between inner and outer, the proper and the inappropriate, the repressed and the expressed. Conforming to the principle of sublimation, mythic, legendary or fantastic tales depict paradoxically everyman's history in an ahistorical time. Steeped in the unconscious, tales – according to Mircea Eliade – portray the “human primordial,” the “mythical, paradisaic time” of childhood when desires as well as frustrations surface (77). Eliade notes that two psychoanalytic ideas are highly relevant to myth, namely the bliss of the “beginnings,” or the child's pre-weaning period, as well as the concept of memory, of revisiting old traumas and the nostalgic losses of the past (78). In an interplay of fact and fiction, folktales feature a representation of infantile plenitude and maturational distress. Folklore voices the desire for wholeness, unity and return to an infantile pre-lapsarian state of no inner conflicts. In the world of folklore, negativity, rivalry, and all the elements that mar the infant's perception of the outside world are cathartically depicted. It is in this sense that Lutz Rohrich remarks that “[t]he folktale touches all of our personal relationships, those between parents and children, siblings, husband and wife, master and servant.” (214) Bruno Bettelheim agrees as to the involvement of the tale with real problems of individual development arguing for the role of fairy tales “to master the psychological problems of growing up, overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries.” (6) Despite its supernatural elements, the folktale is neither cut off from the world of reality nor the world of human development and interaction. It intervenes within human relations to soothe crises, for the tale constitutes a summary of growing into maturity, and psychologically handling anxiety-laden relationships.

Therefore, it can be argued that the folktale embodies a story of initiation featuring the evolution of an individual from childlike innocence to psychological maturity. The unsuspected hero of the tales is set before different ordeals and is required to face many life-threatening situations in order to reach enlightenment and fulfillment. In Mircea Eliade's words, the tales' “content proper refers to a terrifying serious reality: initiation, that is passing by way of a symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult.” (201) Folktales mediate between individual and the family to soothe unconscious fears, but they also mediate between individual and society to alleviate identity crises. Repressed desires and passionate outbursts menace not only the cohesion of a family unit but they also foreshadow the dissolution of an extended community. In this frame of mind, folklore sets the standards for an “appropriate” socially conditioned

behavior. Due to antagonism, jealousy and the impulse of appropriation, folklore channels and helps keep in abeyance the antisocial motives arising in day-to-day intercourse. It personalizes nature and the supernatural and attempts to persuade these extrapersonal forces, as well as the members of the group, to operate within the course of the expected. Or it creates mechanisms by which the group can psychologically handle the unexpected, once it happens. (Abrahams 18)

Apart from being a vent for the repressed and a means of transmitting past knowledge, folktales also channel uncontrollable emotions into admissible modes of expression and conduct. In this light, folklore and folktales serve an institutionalization purpose with reference to aberrant social tendencies that threaten the survival of the group and community cohesion. Drawing upon the simple imagery of “good” and “bad,” tales both individualize and generalize experience seeking to frame “proper” behavioral patterns. Distilling and moderating extreme sentiments, folktales participate in the process of normalization while at the same time, they offer a glimpse of an overturned reality and imminent dissolution. Hence, psychoanalytic concerns seem much in accordance with the themes that folktales pose, for although tales “are unreal, they are not untrue” (Bettelheim 73) as they are formed by the individual’s perception of the outside world.

*Beneath the façade of child-like innocence and the handling of individual inner traumas, folktales also work on a collective level disclosing political and ideological concerns. From a Marxist viewpoint, Vladimir Propp in *Theory and History of Folklore* underlines the necessity of unveiling a tale’s ideological intentions noting that “[i]n the study of folklore special attention should be directed to the basis, which is primarily the forms of production, and for the folklore of the feudal period the basis is mainly the forms of peasant labor.” (iii) With this comment, it is implied that the basis of folktales is invariably politically and ideologically charged. Whether the tale has surfaced in an attempt to constitute a vent for the individual repressed or to channel collective concerns, folklore has been colored by the dominant ideology of each era – agricultural, bourgeois or industrial. In Propp’s own words, the tale “has to be examined in connection with the environment that gave rise to it,” for in order to “determine the origins of the wondertale, we must draw upon the broad cultural material of the past” (*Theory and History of Folklore* 84). Consequently, folktales cannot be seen as cut off from the political, social or ideological conditions that engendered them since they summarize the early beginnings of a nation’s identity.*

Weaved out of a nation or a community’s raw materials, folktales foster and maintain the idea of unity and national cohesion. Due to their connotations

of primitivism and pastoralism, folktales and folklore foster the development of a tightly-woven and land-based “folk” culture and a particular “folk” community. Benedict Anderson points out that communities are always “imagined because the members do not know each other, have little way of encountering each other, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (6) Folklore serves as the basis of connecting to one another on a cultural/ethnic level. Because cultural, ethnic or even national cohesion can be maintained and safeguarded by a country’s historical, mythical or heroic ties, folktales have become a community’s residual history. Communities, in this sense, “are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 49). In psychoanalytic terms, national communities are constituted through and within folktales as images of wholeness, unity and cultural integrity, bound together by a set of arbitrary values. Interest hence, does not lie to the truth or falsity of folklore’s claims but rather to the sociopolitical and nationalist implications of it.

Like the human individual, the folk nation can achieve coherence only by the introjection of an idealized version of its ethnic self and the projection of cultural threat and moral disintegration upon the “other” folk nation/community. This double force of introjection/projection appears in folktales in the depictions of two opposite personas, the hero and the villain. The pair of hero-villain in folktales represents the binary of self and other and the perennial battle between the virtuous folk community and the corrupting ethnic other. As Orrin Klapp discusses, such conceptions in the tales “are truly collective in nature” and “[w]hen a person is called a hero [or a] villain...this has important implications for his status, influence and the kind of treatment he will perceive” (56). Heroes and villains are archetypal not only in an individual basis but on a collective societal plane as well. More significantly, embracing social qualities of the proper and the condemned, the acts of heroization or vilification penetrate into the domain of the political.

Political representations insinuate a specific kind of treatment, a friendly or adverse disposition. The politicization of the hero and the villain, enforces attitudes and conditions stances. While the nation’s evil other is deemed unworthy of just treatment and constitutes a mirror of aggression, “appropriate behavior toward a hero includes recognition of his unusual achievement, commemoration, holding him up as an example, and otherwise converting him into a cherished collective symbol” (Klapp 57). Paradoxically the entire nation seems to be contained within this heroic fantasy. A national, an ethnic or a regional hero comes to gather, portray and conversely to enforce an idealized image of existence, a valorized status of an ethnic

minority, or else a distinctive honorific recognition of a region's uniqueness. In Orrin Klapp's words, heroes "symboliz[e] success, perfection and conquest of evil, providing a model for identification by the group – one might say its better self" (57). Identification with an ideal self guarantees both individual and ethnic viability. The hero and the villain then, constitute the outlet of public and private struggles. They are the soothing device or else the defense mechanism of putting at rest the re-emerging individual anxieties and sociopolitical menaces. As the repressed is sublimated in art, heroes and villains in tales touch upon the psychoanalytic process of symbol formation through the use of the stereotype.

Overall, in this paper, I attempted to historically track the development of literary folklore in brief and I succinctly discussed the thematic concerns of Celtic and Southern folktales. My main concern was to argue, in psychoanalytic terms, over the significance of the archetypal nature of folktales in the development of identity. The oral residues of folktales classify them as one of the most elementary forms of literature. Even though folktales describe unreal or surreal situations, they have influenced our interpretations of individual ego development as well as collective identity formation. Emotional processes of anxiety, stress, trauma, maturity, success and defeat are all inherent in the cultural transmission of tales globally. Through the dichotomy of hero-villain, folktales reinforce the creation of ethnic pride and hence ethno-cultural communities that define their singularity and cohesion against an-other group. Folktales constitute the memory bank of a people reiterated from generation to generation through their oral transmission. Although the emergence of press supported the dissemination and transmission of folktales, the element of orality and the lack of identifiable authorship constitute to this day a proof of "folk" roots and a people's authenticity.

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