

Metamorphosis

*the dynamics
of symbolism in
european fairy tales*



francisco vaz da silva

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Alan Dundes
General Editor

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Editor's Preface

Of all the genres of folklore, the fairy tale is perhaps the most challenging. The fairy tale or wonder tale is a subset of the more comprehensive "folktale" that includes animal tales, jokes, and formula tales among other forms of fictional folk narrative. The fairy tale is challenging because its content is so obviously full of fantasy. In the world of "Once upon a time," the listener (or nowadays the reader) is plunged into a morass of seemingly indecipherable symbols and events. While there have been valiant attempts over the past several centuries to probe the meaning of individual tales, few scholars have dared to explore the depths of the fairy tale genre *in toto*.

Among the handful of major twentieth century landmarks in fairy tale analysis were Vladimir Propp's 1928 *Morphology of the Folktale* which, its English translated title notwithstanding, dealt with the fairy tale only, and Bengt Holbek's 1987 *Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective*. Neither of these important works written by folklorists, one Russian, one Danish, was primarily concerned with symbolism, although Holbek's treatise did touch upon the subject. As a result, our understanding of the possible symbolic significance of European fairy tales is unfortunately minimal. A review of the relevant literature reveals that for the most part, scholars with a serious interest in symbolism (as listed, for example, among Manfred Lurker's more than eleven thousand entries in his 1968 *Bibliographie zur Symbolkunde*) know next to nothing about folkloristics and by the same token, the vast majority of folklorists absolutely eschew anything remotely resembling symbolic approaches to the fairy tale.

In this context, it is all the more remarkable to discover that perhaps the most ambitious attempt to date seeking to grapple with the underlying symbolic nature of the European fairy tale is the erudite effort of a Portuguese anthropologist. Anthropologists as a rule tend to limit their interest in folklore to such genres as myths and proverbs. Francisco Vaz da Silva is an exception to that rule, and he has succeeded admirably in mastering the subject matter of fairy tales and the scholarship devoted to that genre.

In *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales*, Vaz da Silva has not only absorbed what Propp and Holbek have contributed to our knowledge of fairy tales, but he has gone far beyond them, offering a whole new way of looking at this genre. Readers lacking his sophistication in fairy tale research (as well as semiotics and psychoanalytic theory) may

not be able to fully appreciate the magisterial sweep of his fertile imagination and the ambitious scope of this unique perspicacious tour de force. But even novices will be able to see his exciting ingenious readings of such classics as *Dragon Slayer*, *Cinderella*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. There are acknowledged intellectual debts to Freud and Lévi-Strauss and many, many others; but the overall synthesis is something entirely original. Neither Freud nor Lévi-Strauss ever wrote an entire book devoted to the fairy tale. Vaz da Silva has penned an *opus* which, I believe, is destined to change the way future generations of scholars analyze fairy tales.

One of the key desiderata in creative scholarship is the ability to make connections, to see patterns in what to the untrained eye seems random or irrational or nonsensical. Francisco Vaz da Silva in this extraordinary book guides the reader through a series of symbolic equivalents that at first glance may seem strange and unfounded. But as he adduces texts from Scandinavia, medieval literature, and even the Old Testament in addition to fairy tale traditions, many from his own native Portugal, the reader will become increasingly persuaded by the ingenious readings he proposes. I confess that I myself was skeptical when I first heard him suggest that *The Dragon Slayer* and *Cinderella* were in some sense one and the same tale. I thought the suggestion was absurd and not possible to demonstrate. I was wrong, and if readers take the time to read Vaz da Silva's argument carefully, they will be able to understand the subtlety and importance of this discovery. There are countless other brilliant insights contained in this remarkable encyclopedic synthesis.

Francisco Vaz da Silva was born in Lisbon in 1960. He earned his first degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Lisbon in 1983, his M.A. in Anthropology at the University of Minho in 1987, and his doctorate in Symbolic Anthropology at the University of Lisbon in 1995. While carrying out conventional anthropological fieldwork in northern Portugal involving family structure and kinship, he suddenly realized that fairy tales of the sort collected by Portuguese folklorists and others contained a folk representation of the problems that interested him. When he began to look at what folklorists had had to say about fairy tales, he was disappointed at their unending obsessive concern with classification and their consistent refusal to see fairy tales as repositories of worldview. This stimulated him to look at fairy tales as symbolic representations of social structure and family dynamics. And the happy result is this groundbreaking book. Dr. Vaz da Silva is presently "Professor Auxiliar" at the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa at the University of Lisbon.

Acknowledgments

A decisive event for the actual writing of this book was a period of unhindered research that I spent at the superlative libraries of the University of California, Berkeley in the spring term of 1999. This was made possible by the kind invitation of Candace Slater and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, a six-month sabbatical leave granted by my home institution in Lisbon, and a Fulbright grant. I warmly thank all people and institutions concerned, including Paulo Zagalo e Melo and his wonderful staff at the Luso-American Cultural Commission in Lisbon, and Kathy Zvanovec-Higbee, at the time program manager of the Portuguese Studies Program in Berkeley.

A book is a part of a life; in this sense, it incurs many more debts than I could reasonably mention here. At the very least, I must thank Isabel Cardigos and Miguel Tamen for decisive help—not necessarily conscious—at precisely the right times. Even more important, I owe a special debt to Alan Dundes for unfaltering support and encouragement, as well as for judicious criticism of my argument. I am very grateful. Likewise, Nélia Dias has selflessly ensured me the peace of mind required to bringing this task to fruition. Thank you so much.

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Introduction

In essence, this book is the result of my longstanding struggle to come to terms with a suspicion that something is amiss in the field of fairy-tale studies. Its starting point was my desire to overcome two causes for enduring perplexity. The first of these is rather localized, as it concerns a discrepancy between my conviction that fairy tales involve complex symbolism and the assessment that this genre has been most assiduously studied in perspectives that concentrate on aspects of form and classification, to the detriment of content and meaning. The second is more general; it addresses a discrepancy between a general agreement on the essential unity of the human species—which seemingly entails taking for granted a common symbolic function—and the fact that the very notion of charting fundamental symbolism on an ethnographic and crosscultural basis is not pertinent to many scholars even today. In this connection, anthropologists often call upon the mighty specter of James George Frazer to serve as a bogeyman. Yet, as one sagacious representative of an anti-Frazer generation in British anthropology has well put the matter, even though one may object to Frazer's results, "in principle he was right. There are uniformities and common patterns in the customs and institutions of mankind" (Fortes 1959, 8). This book is an attempt to explore such uniformities in the realm of folklore, from the perspective of European fairy tales.¹

My basic working assumption, that fairy tales are symbolic, is by itself not new. What may be original in this book is a refusal to accept the entrenched preconception that such tales, being the result of some devolutionary process (see Dundes 1969), are therefore not to be taken altogether seriously.² Alternatively, I submit that European fairy tales are a privileged source for the study of worldview. Moreover, I hope to show that this genre reveals, by its stable scheme hinging on enchantments and disenchantments, a cyclic ontology—one that underlies, in fact, much of folklore and mythology worldwide. Hence, I suggest, Ovid's demonstration that the perspective of metamorphosis is apt to bring together much of classic mythology rings true, even beyond this specific domain of human imagination, in the overall realm of European folklore as well as in other cultural contexts.

Borrowing from a well-known proverb, one example is worth a thousand words. Therefore, to convey the spirit of my theoretical and methodological options, why not bring the reader right into the heart of the matter by telling a short meta-story. Once upon a time, in a certain French village, an enchanting ethnologist collected from some informant the following



Folklorists have become renowned for concentrating on aspects of form and classification to the detriment of content and meaning. *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales* seeks to reverse this tendency in showing, through an examination of the folkloric data, that European fairy tales involve complex symbolism. This book seeks to explain—in reference to the notion of metamorphosis—the puzzling contradictory attributes of fairy-tale figures that have discouraged the study of meanings in this field and proposes that the workings of metamorphosis in fairy tales reveal a pervasive cyclic ontology that underlies mythology and ritual generally. The issue of universal symbolism is again examined—divested from any “archetypal” generalizations—as a subject of worthy reflection.

Francisco Vaz da Silva is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Folklore at ISCTE, Instituto Superior das Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa, University of Lisbon, where he also received his Ph.D. in Symbolic Anthropology. He has published numerous articles in professional journals in Europe and America.



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