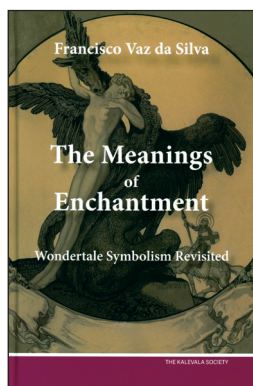


Приказ / Review

Wondertale Symbolism in the 21st Century: Mythic Thinking and Modern Mind

Francisco Vaz da Silva. *The Meanings of Enchantment: Wondertale Symbolism Revisited*. Talinn: Kalevalaseura-säätiö, 2023, 218 pp.



The Meanings of Enchantment: Wondertale Symbolism Revisited by Francisco Vaz da Silva is a book which poses a simple, yet pertinent question for every folklore scholar immersed in their study: What do we forget to unread once we have started reading into the material under examination? Just as Roberta Frank once said that every age has their own *Beowulf* poet tailored to the needs of the moment, so it seems to be the case with fairy tales, which Vaz da Silva refers to as “wondertales” covering both oral and literary stories that “keep the wondrous aspect in sight” (p. 2). In order to come to the bottom of the question he proposes the application of the comparative method which should enable one to unearth the core of the wondrous in wondertales, i.e., to understand the crystalized aspects of the metaphorical thinking of the *pensée sauvage*. His proposition unites the myth and wondertale stipulating the same origin of the two—they both stem from the “savage mind” narrating a story of children’s coming of age which actually had a very concrete meaning for the original audience and the narrator. However, male protagonist is the pivot point of the myth and the male point of view is the one which Vaz da Silva challenges in this book. He claims that it is the female protagonist that is the central point of the wondertale, her menarche and the lunar cycle which is its macrocosmic reflection. Tipping thus the scales in favor of the heroine and turning the general androcentric view on its head, Vaz da Silva sets out on the journey of explaining why it is the feminine side that is seen as predominant for the overall understanding of what wondertales are actually about, without the sugarcoating evident in modern, usually televised interpretations, claiming that it is necessary to take all different fairy-tale variants into consideration if one is to grasp what the narrative is all about.

Starting off with a typical dragon-slaying wondertale (*The Three Stolen Princesses*, ATU 301), the author pinpoints the international nature of the type as well as the fact that the kernel of the tale is conserved—the third kills the three-headed (or the six-headed), so it is actually an initiation rite that lies at the core of the tale. However, the third princess stolen by the dragon is the one who is on bed and in a strange land, sleeping or becoming enchanted at a certain age (e.g., fifteen), which brings the motif of death and rebirth to the fore of the tale, and its cyclicity looms quite large at its core—one moves from the state of non-enchantment, to enchantment and back to non-enchantment in the wondertale, but it is not the path of a hero, it is the path of a heroine. Amending Propp's androcentric view, the author proposes that the smallest stories which only have a donor's test and end with the acquisition of a reward—an otherworldly power—are the core of wondertales, and the gifts that girls receive actually transform them, even though they may seem trivial, as Propp noted it, since they amount to nice garments, good looks, spinning and weaving equipment, etc. Vaz da Silva goes on to investigate if the similarities could be found in different stories, comparing *Snake Helper* with *Frolka the Dropout* (the aforementioned dragon-slaying wondertale), and finding essentially a set of allomotifs which need to be deciphered in order for the stable pattern to emerge. The dragon/snake and the girl are associated once the girl is "in bloom," and rose symbolism is discovered as being persistently applied to the girl's "ripeness," alongside other symbols of her virginity such as unbroken containers (e.g., jars). The association is connected to another mentioned agent, the Moon, which stands for the inherent split of the girl's persona—she is at the same time the dark and the shining one, the one producing flowers or snakes, depending on the Moon. The exact same connection is made between snakes and dragons—dragons, being flying snakes, abduct girls at the time when they start cycling together with the Moon, they protect them in the same way as they guard the treasure in epic poems, and once they are defeated, they yield the girl, her dowry, and usually kingship to the one who has accomplished the feat.

In some cases, the maiden herself may be dangerous, i.e., she has a dragon or a snake inside her and her wooer, with a helper, must get rid of the dragon/snake in order to take the wife which "underscores the supernatural dimension of the wedding night" (p. 68). So, the act of snake's vanishing and the bride's defloration converge. However, it is the snake, that is sometimes referred to as her "sister" that shows what the snake might also stand for—her own blood, her kin, father and brothers who protect her and guard even against the potential wooers. Therefore, the maidens are abducted from their enchanted state, either from a snake/dragon or from the Moon that possesses the bride "until a victorious husband comes by," and that, Vaz da Silva claims,

is “the core notion of wondertale enchantments and disenchantments” (p. 73). What precedes this moment is the maturation of a girl and this time abounds in symbols, too.

A girl is named after a plant that her mother stole from a witch’s garden and after some time the girl walks by the same garden and the witch claims that it is time the girl stayed with her; she makes the girl bleed in a way (e.g., bites at her finger) and after that she is locked away in a tower. She lives with the witch until a prince happens to pass by and notices her; but the witch turns her into a dog and after some time the enchantment is revoked and they get married. The girl’s name usually refers to plants which stimulate female hemorrhage, the author propounds, and they signify her inevitable future. When she bleeds for the first time, she is taken by the witch, then she is transformed and only later suitable to get married—those three stages stand for her maturation. The witch is the guardian of the girl’s chastity in this case, but even she cannot protect her from her destiny—to bear a child once she is mature enough and attracts the prince. The thirteen fairies also stand for the lunar calendar, and it is the thirteenth fairy that casts a spell on a girl—to enter the lunar cycle, to become mature by pricking her finger on a spindle, by bleeding. Once in a tower, the girl will be protected from everything until the sun or a wooer enters the tower. In her enchanted state of sleeping, she will be deflowered by a wooer, of which she will later on have some memories, and consequently bear a child. Or, in some other variants, a grape or a piece of an apple lodged in her throat will be taken out by a wooer, and this “upward displacement” stands for defloration, too. The author claims, justifiably it may be said, that the sparsity of the *Sleeping Beauty* variants in oral tradition as opposed to *Snow White* may be explained by the process of selection in which it was becoming more and more difficult to account for the sleeping girl’s defloration as the time went by, whereas in *Snow White* the removal of an apple seemed to be, on the face of it, a much less shocking way of saying the same thing. Thus, to a modern mind, it proved to be more palatable and in line with the changing cultural values.

Finally, sleeping beauties and dragon slayers come together in the variants of wondertales in which blood flows as a boy enters the tower, and it may be the blood of ogres and snakes, there is a thunderstorm, fire is found, rekindled and extinguished, the defloration scene is substituted by the exchange of tokens (e.g., rings). The beauty resides in a tower which is the space belonging only to her and her guardian (a dragon, a brother, a crone), she does not belong to her father any more (who is interpreted as the instigator of defloration by the prince), but she does not belong to the prince yet either. However, it is the fire that attracts the wooer; it is the fire extinguished (by blood) that stands for menarche, and the fire rekindled

which amounts to defloration and incumbent child-bearing, the symbolism which Vaz da Silva flanks up by the examples from living traditions in which women are put on top of ovens—which refer to womb metaphorically—to promote their sexual aptitude, to turn from “cinders to fire.” That is why, Vaz da Silva concludes, in wondertales the pattern is feminine, everything depends on her blood and fire, on female enchantment, marked by blood, and disenchantment, marked by fire.

In the concluding chapter, the author showcases some examples of modern narratives, both in writing and on screen, and pinpoints that wondertale functions in the same way, utilizes the same metaphorical means to send messages even to the modern-day audience. That is the most important take-home lesson offered by the book—what is important is preserved quite meticulously despite all the adaptations and alterations, the immutable core undeniably shines through.

Данијела Лекић / Danijela Lekić
Институт за књижевност и уметност, Београд /
Institute for Literature and Arts, Belgrade
E-mail: danijelamitrovic.16@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3277-0435>

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