

RECOGNIZING FEMALE SEXUALITY: AT 313, THE MAID AS MENTOR IN THE YOUNG MAN'S MATURATION

Gerald Thomas*

AT 313, *The Girl as Helper in the Hero's Flight*, amongst the longest of Märchen, is also rich with complex symbolism, and requires, for a comprehensive interpretation, a much fuller treatment than can be adequately contained within the prescribed twenty minutes. It is for this reason that I focus principally on one aspect of the tale's meaning, summarized in the first part of my title, *Recognizing Female Sexuality*. The second part of my title AT 313, *The Maid as Mentor in the Young Man's Maturation* aptly summarizes what I feel would be an appropriate renaming of the tale type, if such a renaming were based uniquely on versions of the tale I or my students have collected from French Newfoundlanders over an almost thirty year period, and if, more pertinently, there was sufficient scholarly agreement on the meaning and function of the tale. In focussing on female sexuality in the tale, however, I wish to stress not only its centrality to an understanding of the tale's meaning, but also the crucial significance of the relationship between tale interpretation and what Bengt Holbek called "the storytelling community."

My theoretical approach derives from Bengt Holbek's *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (1987). I trust it is safe to assume your familiarity with this most important study, if only for its insistence on the relationship of meaning to context, because my interpretation of AT 313, and of the many other folktales collected amongst French Newfoundlanders, is based on the same premise. The question of meaning in narrative, then, deals here with the specifics of one storytelling community rather than with universals or generalities.

In drawing on Holbek's work, I note that AT 313 is, by his definition, a fairy tale, i.e. a tale "which end[s] with a wedding or with the triumph of a couple married earlier under ignominious circumstances, after a series of events characterized by the occurrence of tale elements [...] defined as *symbolic*" (p. 452).

For Holbek, symbolic elements are the marvellous motifs in such tales, and he argues that "symbolic elements refer to features of the real world as experienced by the storytellers and their audiences" (p. 435). They allow the narrator "to speak of the problems, hopes and ideals of the community" (p. 435).

Holbek explains the metamorphosis of emotional impressions into symbolic expressions by a sequence of seven rules, including the split, particularization,

* Memorial University of Newfoundland, Dept. of Folklore, CDN – St. John's A 1C 5S7, Canada.
Email: geraldt@morgan.vcs.mun.ca

projection, externalization, hyperbole, quantification and contraction, rules, he feels, which underlie Olrik's epic laws, Lüthi's *Stiltendenzen*, and which are virtually identical to the "mechanisms" for the formation of myths and dreams described by Freud and Rank. In the present interpretation, these rules are incorporated without comment.

Also important to Holbek's thesis is the pattern of semantic oppositions characteristic of fairy tales, summarized by him as *High-Low*, *Male-Female*, and *Young-Adult*. These oppositions encapsulate in their various combinations the three conflicts inherent in fairy tales, to wit conflict between the generations, the meeting of the sexes, and social opposition between the "haves" and the "have-nots." In other words, there are three categories of crises occurring in such tales. The first includes "Those of the young in their parental home: incestuous attraction; the rebellion of the young against the tyranny and abuse of their parents; the desire of the young to obtain independence; or, conversely, their being sent away from home prematurely;" the second category includes "Those associated with the meeting of the sexes: learning to appreciate and love a person of the opposite sex; winning the other person's love; his/her attachment to the parent of the opposite sex;" and thirdly, "Those associated with establishing a secure basis for the married life of the new couple, which implies the recognition of the low-born partner by the high-born partner's family and the older generation's acceptance of the necessity of relinquishing its hold on the "kingdom" to the younger generation" (p. 418).

Now AT 313 has all three crises occurring within it, and this may explain why the tale seems to have been the most widely told Märchen in Franco-Newfoundland society. More importantly, the tale's symbols lend themselves, in the storytelling context, to the kind of restrained application of Freudian psychoanalytic theory favoured by Holbek. A Freudian-based interpretation of symbols must be related to context, and if I adopt, as does Holbek, such a theoretical position it is precisely because within the social context of the storytelling community as I have come to know it over the last thirty years, such an interpretation is very plausible, since it coincides with observed and orally acquired testimony.

As you will recall, AT 313 can be conveniently divided into three principal sections. The first includes the hero's encounter with the villain, who strips him of his wealth and possessions, proposing their return if the hero can find the villain's home in a prescribed period. On his search, the hero encounters three helpers who enable him to reach his goal in the allotted time.

The second section of the tale, the longest and most complex, deals with the meeting of hero and heroine, the imposition by her father upon the hero of three tasks, their successful completion by means of the heroine's help, their marriage and escape, which includes three transformations designed to foil the pursuing father. The third and final section has the heroine warn the hero, who wishes to visit his family, not to let anyone kiss him lest he forget everything that has

happened. He is kissed, forgets everything, and a new marriage is arranged for him by his parents. Before the marriage, everyone is invited to attend. Three men, one of whom may be the hero, invite the heroine to the wedding, each failing in an attempt to seduce her. The wedding takes place, but the heroine, with the help of talking animals, restores the hero's memory. Then, by means of the parable of the gold and iron keys, the hero convinces the assembled wedding party that his first wife is his legitimate wife, and, we must assume, they then live happily ever after.

In the broadest terms, an analysis of the tale as a whole, following Holbek's thesis, suggests that it proposes resolution of each of the three crises occurring in the tale. At a deeper level, the tale also describes the process of maturation – of the hero as he develops from a brash juvenile into a mature young male, of the heroine as she passes through the Electral stage of development, replacing her father with the hero as the object of her natural affections. Other, general features also manifest themselves, such as the need for cooperation between husband and wife, the requirement of mutual trust, and so on.

The most crucial stage of the hero's maturation, and indeed of the heroine's, occurs in the second section of the tale, and it is on this section that the remainder of my paper will focus. In this section, which involves not only the coming together of the sexes but also a significant amount of generational conflict, it can be argued that it is the heroine, rather than the hero, who occupies the centre stage. Further, careful analysis shows that the heroine acts like a mature young woman who is an able manipulator of the two men in her life – her suitor and her father – and is both aware and in control of her sexuality.

Let us examine the episode in detail. In the versions of the tale I have collected from French Newfoundlanders, the episode begins with the hero being told to hide, and steal the heroine's clothes when she and her sisters land by a lake. In terms of a real life situation, stealing a girl's clothes, as a means of bringing the hero to her attention, is the act of an immature juvenile, not the act of a confident young adult male. It is akin to the pulling of ribbons in a girl's hair, or snapping her bra straps, the kind of behaviour one associates with males in their early teens. The heroine, rather than retaliating in juvenile fashion, negotiates, trading information for her clothes. We should take note that the heroine arrives in her bird costume in order to bathe, naked in the lake. That we are dealing with the female in her sexual aspect is based on the acknowledged symbolism of water as the female principle. Significant, too, is the advice she gives the hero about dealing with her father; it is the first step in her evolution in the father-daughter relationship. Her advice allows the hero to foil the father's attempts to make away with him on the very day of his arrival. I further note that in most Franco-Newfoundland versions of the tale, hero and heroine fall in love at first sight.

The three tasks the hero is successively asked to undertake are, symbolically, the most significant elements in the tale, though to be understood fully, they

must be interpreted with reference to the principals: father, daughter and suitor. Each task represents sexual aspects of the tripartite relationship, and each contributes both to the evolution of the relationships and to the maturation of hero and heroine.

The tasks appear to be impossible, and our assumption is that the father does not expect the hero to perform them; but neither does he apparently suspect any possible involvement in them on the part of his daughter. Not infrequently, the first task assigned to the hero is to fell the father's trees, either with a blunt axe or an axe made out of paper or cardboard. The second task assigned is that the hero should empty the lake with a basket full of holes, with the occasional additional requirement that the dried lake bloom with flowers by the deadline for completion of the task. The order of these two tasks may alternate, but the third task, retrieval of an egg from the pinnacle of a glass tower, is always the last.

Symbolically, we can understand the tasks as attempts by the father to demonstrate the hero's inadequacy to replace him as the dominant male vis-à-vis the daughter, or challenges to the hero to prove that he is adequate to the task. Simple Freudian symbolism permits this interpretation. The father's trees are a phallic symbol, as is the axe. But the axe is blunt or made of paper, clearly incapable of cutting down trees. That success is achieved is due entirely to the heroine's *power*, which we must understand to be sexual in nature. In effect, she shows the hero how to cut the trees, by first doing it for him. At the same time, her symbolic castration of her father asserts her maturity and her preparedness to replace her filial ties with a mature relationship with a man other than her father.

The second task, involving the emptying of the lake with a basket, is similarly sexual in symbolic terms. The basket is a yonic symbol, the water a symbol of the female principle, particularly associated with birth and fertility, an interpretation supported by the occasional requirement to make the empty lake bloom with flowers. We suggest that the heroine has taught the hero about male sexuality in the first task, and about female sexuality in the second. In real life terms, she is initiating him into a sexual relationship. However, it should be noted that in the course of the first two tasks, the hero is a passive participant; he does not actually do anything himself, except to eat the food the heroine has brought him. Further, we note that from the heroine's perspective, in order to be with the hero and do his tasks for him, she has had to deceive and manipulate her father. This underlines the severing of the father-daughter relationship and her growing maturity.

The third task requires the hero to scale a glass tower and retrieve an egg from its summit. As with the first two tasks, he is hopelessly incapable of completing it and is again resigned to failure. Once more the heroine comes to his rescue, by insisting that he throw her into a yonic vat until the flesh is off her bones, and that he use her bones as a ladder to the top of the tower. The tower itself is clearly a phallic symbol, standing, so to speak, for the father. This time, he

not only does what the heroine tells him, it is he who acts by scaling the tower. He is not completely successful when acting by himself, since he forgets the bone of the heroine's little toe when he restores her to life by throwing the bones back in the vat. We may understand this episode to represent the hero's initiation into sexual intercourse, although he has to be persuaded by the heroine to do as he is told.

The successful conclusion to the third task persuades the father that the hero has apparently attained a sufficient level of maturity to justify marrying him to one of his daughters. Again, in real life terms, it may suggest that the father is now aware that some kind of sexual behaviour is taking place between the hero and one of his daughters; but the hero is ignominiously forced to choose his bride blindfold, and on his knees. It is only because of his earlier oversight with the bone of the heroine's little toe that he chooses correctly. The marriage confirms the final movement of the heroine out of the Electral phase of her development. The hero has presumably learnt to put his faith in his wife and now understands the importance of cooperation for a young couple to succeed. It is the resolution, then, of the second of Holbek's three crises.

The third crisis now needs to be faced and resolved, and this is achieved partly in the second section of this central episode, and partly in the third and concluding section of the tale. The third crisis deals with the young couple's attempt to establish itself as a viable, independent social unit. But as in real life, there is opposition to this progress on the part of the heroine's parents. In the tale, it is illustrated by the implicit obligation laid on the couple to remain *in loco parentis*, thereby demonstrating the parental view that while married, the young couple is still not able to survive on its own. This situation was often reflected in Franco-Newfoundland society when newly-wed couples were obliged, for economic reasons usually, to remain in the parents' home for an indeterminate period of time. The potential for generational conflict in such circumstances is evident and does not need comment here.

Holbek's rule of contraction now comes into play. The couple is determined to leave the parental home at once, and the heroine bakes three talking cakes and tells her husband to steal her father's best horse. While the talking cakes give them time in their escape, it is the heroine's mother who now urges her husband to check on the couple and after the requisite three responses from the talking cakes, the father takes off in pursuit of the couple.

The three transformations which follow, engineered by the heroine, are all to be understood as sexual in nature. However, they are no longer intended to promote the hero's maturation as much as to convince the father that the couple is sufficiently mature to function as an independent unit. The first transformation has the heroine turn into a church, the hero into a priest, and they are not recognised by the father who charges onto the scene. Symbolically, the church can be understood as representative both of home and of female sexuality, the

hero, in his guise as priest (which parenthetically should be simply understood as a Christian veneer), stands for the male principle defending hearth, home and wife, and indeed her sexuality. He is telling the father that he no longer has any control over his daughter as a woman.

The second transformation turns the heroine into a forest, the hero into a woodcutter. The father, who again blunders upon the scene, sees the hero cutting wood, a clear symbol of sexual intercourse. The father fails to recognise (or does not want to recognise) what is going on. The final transformation turns the heroine into a pond, the hero into a drake swimming in the pond. The father charges right into the pond in his vain attempt to locate the couple. It is tantamount to saying that the father has blundered into his daughter's bedroom while she is engaged in intercourse with her husband. For the father's part, it may or may not have had the effect of opening his eyes to the new reality; at any event, he disappears from the tale, and though his wife sometimes makes a final attempt to catch the couple, she too fails. At this point, the couple has successfully severed its bonds with parental authority.

The remainder of the tale deals with the resolution of the final crisis, the acceptance by the older generation of the young couple, though not without some further stages in the hero's maturation, and at least one lesson of relevance to real life.

Failing to follow his wife's instruction to the letter, he is kissed into forgetfulness, lapsing into parental control once again. In the meantime his wife, now alone, successfully resists the advances of her forgetful husband and his two *doppelgangers*, by imposing upon them the task of closing a door of some kind, a door which they are unable to close. Symbolically, failure to close the various doors represents failure to achieve sexual success with the young wife who, for her part, demonstrates her loyalty to her husband as well as her ingenuity in foiling unwanted suitors. This brief interlude in the tale seems on the surface simply to be a means of introducing the talking hen and rooster; in reality, it is much more significant. Many French Newfoundlanders used to go away to work in the lumber woods during the winter, and might well harbour fears about a young wife's fidelity. This episode serves to stress to the husband the need for trust in his wife.

It is her power again, in the form of the talking hen and rooster, which allow restoration of her husband's memory, and he, for the first time in the tale, acts entirely on his own initiative, when he tells the story of the gold and iron keys to his would-be second father-in-law, and persuades him of the legitimacy of his first marriage. He has finally achieved full maturity and the couple is accepted by adult society, to live, we assume, happily ever after.

Now there are numerous other dimensions to the interpretation of this tale which I have only hinted at or ignored completely, wishing to focus on one specific and I think crucial element of the tale, the issue of sexuality. What the tale reveals – and here I must return to the real world context in which the tale was told – is that

in Franco-Newfoundland society, adults were perfectly well aware of the power of sex and, more pertinently, of the role of woman in initiating and directing the development of relationships with men. Although, as Holbek himself stressed, the tales deal with delicate issues rarely discussed openly in rural societies, my long acquaintance with the culture and mores of French Newfoundlanders authorises me to assert that the interpretation of AT 313 which I propose, in part at least, conforms to reality in practice.

Of course, I am not claiming that such tales were conscious blueprints for the resolution of crises and conflicts defined by Holbek. But the reiterated performances of such tales must assuredly have worked on the audiences' subconscious minds, and been absorbed as ideals of possible solutions to the crises the younger, post-pubertal audiences would shortly be experiencing. It is precisely because of the emphasis laid on the role of the female in this tale, and its to me at least apparent reflection of reality in the storytelling community in question, that a more fitting title to the tale might well be, as my title suggested, *The Maid as Mentor in the Young Man's Maturation*.

ABSTRACT

AT 313 is possibly the best known Märchen in the narrative tradition of French Newfoundlanders. Its rich and complex content offers numerous interpretive possibilities, but the novelty of the present reading is that it is rooted in a thorough knowledge of the living, contemporary context in which French-Newfoundland versions have been narrated.

This interpretation draws for its theoretical stance upon Beng Holbk's 1987 *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, with particular emphasis on patterns of semantic oppositions in the tale, its thematic oppositions, and a Freudian-based interpretation of the tale elements defined by Holbek as symbolic, that is the so-called marvellous elements of tales, which, according to Holbek, refer to "features of the real world as experienced by the storytellers and their audiences" (p.435).

Such a reading suggests that AT313 offers to its audience one (among others) pattern of socio-sexual development of young men and women, in which the male moves from juvenile immaturity to adult maturity, but does so under the guidance of females, most particularly with the initiatory help provided by his future partner. The young woman, whose power is sexual, initiates the young man sexually, overcomes her own dependance on her father in the process, and ultimately enables him to achieve maturity in the tale's conclusion.

This reading is permitted on the basis of familiarity with the human context in which the tale has been narrated. Furthermore, the tale, in this context, was most frequently told by men, suggesting an awareness on their part of the crucial role of women in the male maturation process, aptly summarised in the alternative title proposed for AT 313.

ZUSAMMENFASSUN

AaTh 313 ist vermutlich das bekannteste Märchen in der Erzählüberlieferung der französischen Neufundländer. Sein reicher und komplexer Inhalt bietet zahlreiche Interpretationsmöglichkeiten; das Neue an dem vorliegenden Beitrag besteht jedoch darin, daß er auf einer gründlichen Kenntnis des lebendigen zeitgenössischen Kontexts beruht, in dem die Varianten aus Französisch-Neufundland erzählt worden sind.

Die theoretische Grundlage der Interpretation fußt auf Benkt Holbeks *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (1987) mit besonderer Betonung der Muster semantischer Oppositionen im Märchen, seiner thematischen Oppositionen und einer auf Freud basierenden Interpretation der Märchenelemente, die Holbek als symbolisch definierte, d.h. der sogenannten Wunderelemente der Märchen, die sich nach Holbek auf "features of the real world as experienced by the storytellers

and their audiences” (p.435) beziehen. Eine solche Lesart läßt darauf schließen, daß AaTh 313 seinen Zuhörern u.a. ein Modell für die soziosexuelle Entwicklung junger Männer und Frauen bietet, in welchem der mann sich von jugendlicher Unreife unter der Anleitung von Frauen zu erwachsener Reife entwickelt; dies findet sich besonders ausgeprägt in AaTh 313 in der Iniatiationshilfe seine zukünftigen Partnerin. Die junge Frau, deren Stärke in ihrer Sexualität liegt, initiiert den jungen Mann sexuell, überwindet dabei ihre eigene Abhängigkeit vom Vater und verhilft dem Mann schließlich am Ende des Märchens zur Erlangung der Reife.

Diese Lesart ist auf der Grundlage der Vertraulichkeit mit dem menschlichen kontext zulässig, in dem das Märchen erzählt wurde. In diesem Kontext überdies wurde das Märchen am häufigsten von Männern erzählt, was auf ihr Bewußtsein von der entscheidenden Rolle von Frauen im männlichen Reifungsprozeß hinweist, wie es in dem für AaTh 313 vorgeschlagenen neuen titel treffend zusammengefaßt ist.

RESUMO

O conto-tipo AT 313 é talvez o mais conhecido na tradição oral da Terra Nova francesa. O seu conteúdo, rico e complexo, oferece numerosas possibilidades interpretativas, mas a novidade da presente leitura é que se baseia num profundo conhecimento do contexto vivo e contemporâneo em que as versões da Terra Nova francesa foram narradas.

Esta interpretação utiliza como base teórica a *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* de Benkt Holbek (1987), em especial os modelos de oposições semânticas no conto, as oposições temáticas e uma interpretação freudiana dos elementos do conto definida por Holbek como simbólica, isto é, os chamados elementos maravilhosos dos contos, que, segundo Holbek, se referem a “aspectos do mundo real tal como são experimentados pelos contadores e pelos seus ouvintes” (p. 435).

Tal leitura sugere que o conto AT 313 oferece à sua audiência um determinado modelo de desenvolvimento socio-sexual dos rapazes e raparigas, em que o rapaz transita da imaturidade para a maturidade adulta, sendo tal passagem feita sob a orientação de mulheres, especialmente com a ajuda iniciática da sua futura parceira. A rapariga, cujo poder é sexual, inicia sexualmente o rapaz, ultrapassa, por esse facto, a sua própria dependência em relação ao pai, e, em última análise, permite ao rapaz atingir a maturidade no desfecho do conto.

A familiaridade com o contexto humano em que o conto tem sido narrado viabiliza esta leitura. Além disso, o conto, no referido contexto, foi mais frequentemente contado por homens, o que sugere, por parte deles, uma consciência do papel crucial das mulheres no processo de amadurecimento masculino, adequadamente resumido no título alternativo proposto para AT 313.